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THE WORKS
OF
GABORIAU

One Volume Edition

WITHDRAWN

FOUR COMPLETE NOVELS

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MONSIEUR LECOQ

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PREFACE

THREE names stand out above all others in the field of detective stories: Edgar Allan Poe, an American; Conan Doyle, an Englishman who was a close student of Poe's tales, and Emile Gaboriau, a Frenchman. The names of the detectives whose characters they created are almost better known, if anything, than the names of the writers themselves, and for the general public, at the word "detective" three figures appear before the mind's eye, Monsieur Dupin, Monsieur Lecoq, and Sherlock Holmes. Gaboriau was born at Saujon, in the Department of Charente-Inferieure, November 9, 1835. To show his chronological connection in this famous trio of names it will suffice to say that Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" was first published in English in 1845. Charles Baudelaire, the French poet, translated Poe's tales into French in 1857, at which time Gaboriau, a young lawyer's clerk, was thinking of becoming a writer. Later while a member of a cavalry regiment he made his literary debut with two volumes of humorous observations in no wise remarkable. These were succeeded by several novels, none of which gave indication of the strong dramatic quality that was afterward to make his name so well known wherever French or English is read.

About this time he became a member of the staff of one of the well-known Parisian papers, "Le Pays," and it was in this paper, in 1866, that he published "L'Affaire Lerouge" as a serial. Thus we see that nine years after the appearance of a French translation of Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," the first notable American detective story, the first notable

detective story by a Frenchman was published in Paris. Seven years before the latter appeared, Conan Doyle was born, and his first conspicuous achievement as a writer of detective stories, "A Study in Scarlet," was published in 1887.

It has been pointed out by more than one writer that, undeniably clever and fascinating as they are, Conan Doyle's stories show unmistakable Poe influence, as though the writer had been a close student of Poe's work. Gaboriau's method of work is quite unlike that of either Poe or Doyle. By closely following the exact form of judicial procedure in France, and by making the reader a sharer, step by step, in the investigation of a mysterious crime, he succeeded by the very novelty and relentlessness of the method in considerably stimulating interest in a story the details of which were already highly dramatic.

"Young man," said the late Mr. Justice Willes to the Hon. A. E. Gathorne Hardy, "you mean to practise at the Bar, and you will find it useful to know the French criminal practise; you had better read Gaboriau's novels, and they will give you a thorough insight into it."

MONSIEUR LECOQ

AT about eleven o'clock in the evening of the 20th of February, 186--, which chanced to be Shrove Sunday, a party of detectives left the police station near the old Barriere d'Italie to the direct south of Paris. Their mission was to explore the district extending on the one hand between the highroad to Fontainebleau and the Seine, and on the other between the outer boulevards and the fortifications.

This quarter of the city had at that time anything but an enviable reputation. To venture there at night was considered so dangerous that the soldiers from the outlying forts who came in to Paris with permission to go to the theatre, were ordered to halt at the barriere, and not to pass through the perilous district excepting in parties of three or four.

After midnight, these gloomy, narrow streets became the haunt of numerous homeless vagabonds, and escaped criminals and malefactors, moreover, made the quarter their rendezvous. If the day had been a lucky one, they made merry over their spoils, and when sleep overtook them, hid in doorways or among the rubbish in deserted houses. Every effort had been made to dislodge these dangerous guests, but the most energetic measures had failed to prove successful. Watched, hunted, and in imminent danger of arrest though they were, they always returned with idiotic obstinacy, obeying, as one might suppose, some mysterious law of attraction. Hence, the district was for the police an immense trap, constantly baited, and to which the game came of their own accord to be caught.

The result of a tour of inspection of this locality was so certain, that the officer in charge of the police post called to the squad as they departed: "I will prepare lodgings for our guests. Good luck to you and much pleasure!"

This last wish was pure irony, for the weather was the most disagreeable that could be imagined. A very heavy snow storm had prevailed for several days. It was now beginning to thaw,

and on all the frequented thoroughfares the slush was ankle-deep. It was still cold, however; a damp chill filled the air, and penetrated to the very marrow of one's bones. Besides, there was a dense fog, so dense that one could not see one's hands before one's face.

"What a beastly job!" growled one of the agents.

"Yes," replied the inspector who commanded the squad; "if you had an income of thirty thousand francs, I don't suppose you'd be here." The laugh that greeted this common-place joke was not so much flattery as homage to a recognized and established superiority.

The inspector was, in fact, one of the most esteemed members of the force, a man who had proved his worth. His powers of penetration were not, perhaps, very great; but he thoroughly understood his profession, its resources, its labyrinths, and its artifices. Long practise had given him imperturbable coolness, a great confidence in himself, and a sort of coarse diplomacy that supplied the place of shrewdness. To his failings and his virtues he added incontestable courage, and he would lay his hand upon the collar of the most dangerous criminal as tranquilly as a devotee dips his fingers in a basin of holy water.

He was a man about forty-six years of age, strongly built, with rugged features, a heavy mustache, and rather small, gray eyes, hidden by bushy eyebrows. His name was Gevrol, but he was universally known as "the General." This sobriquet was pleasing to his vanity, which was not slight, as his subordinates well knew; and, doubtless, he felt that he ought to receive from them the same consideration as was due to a person of that exalted rank.

"If you begin to complain already," he added, gruffly, what will you do by and by?"

In fact, it was too soon to complain. The little party were then passing along the Rue de Choisy. The people on the footways were orderly; and the lights of the wine-shops illuminated the street. All these places were open. There is no fog or thaw that is potent enough to dismay lovers of pleasure. And a boisterous crowd of maskers filled each tavern, and public ballroom. Through the open windows came alternately the sounds of loud voices and bursts of noisy music. Occasionally, a drunken man staggered along the pavement, or a masked figure crept by in the shadow cast by the houses.

Before certain establishments Gevrol commanded a halt. He gave a peculiar whistle, and almost immediately a man came out. This was another member of the force. His report was listened to, and then the squad passed on.

"To the left, boys!" ordered Gevrol; "we will take the Rue d'Ivry, and then cut through the shortest way to the Rue de Chevaleret."

From this point the expedition became really disagreeable. The way led through an unfinished, unnamed street, full of puddles and deep holes, and obstructed with all sorts of rubbish. There were no longer any lights or crowded wine-shops. No footsteps, no voices were heard; solitude, gloom, and an almost perfect silence prevailed; and one might have supposed oneself a hundred leagues from Paris, had it not been for the deep and continuous murmur that always arises from a large city, resembling the hollow roar of a torrent in some cavern depth.

All the men had turned up their trousers and were advancing slowly, picking their way as carefully as an Indian when he is stealing upon his prey. They had just passed the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers when suddenly a wild shriek rent the air. At this place, and at this hour, such a cry was so frightfully significant, that all the men paused as if by common impulse.

"Did you hear that, General?" asked one of the detectives, in a low voice.

"Yes, there is murder going on not far from here—but where? Silence! let us listen."

They all stood motionless, holding their breath, and anxiously listening. Soon a second cry, or rather a wild howl, resounded.

"Ah!" exclaimed the inspector, "it is at the Poivriere."

This peculiar appellation "Poivriere" or "pepper-box" was derived from the term "peppered" which in French slang is applied to a man who has left his good sense at the bottom of his glass. Hence, also, the sobriquet of "pepper thieves" given to the rascals whose specialty it is to plunder helpless, inoffensive drunkards.

"What!" added Gevrol to his companions, "don't you know Mother Chupin's drinking-shop there on the right. Run."

And, setting the example, he dashed off in the direction indicated. His men followed, and in less than a minute they reached a hovel of sinister aspect, standing alone, in a tract of waste ground. It was indeed from this den that the cries had proceeded. They were now repeated, and were immediately

followed by two pistol shots. The house was hermetically closed, but through the cracks in the window-shutters, gleamed a reddish light like that of a fire. One of the police agents darted to one of these windows, and raising himself up by clinging to the shutters with his hands, endeavored to peer through the cracks, and to see what was passing within.

Gevrol himself ran to the door. "Open!" he commanded, striking it heavily. No response came. But they could hear plainly enough the sound of a terrible struggle—of fierce imprecations, hollow groans, and occasionally the sobs of a woman.

"Horrible!" cried the police agent, who was peering through the shutters; "it is horrible!"

This exclamation decided Gevrol. "Open, in the name of the law!" he cried a third time.

And no one responding, with a blow of the shoulder that was as violent as a blow from a battering-ram, he dashed open the door. Then the horror-stricken accent of the man who had been peering through the shutters was explained. The room presented such a spectacle that all the agents, and even Gevrol himself, remained for a moment rooted to the threshold, shuddering with unspeakable horror.

Everything denoted that the house had been the scene of a terrible struggle, of one of those savage conflicts which only too often stain the barriere drinking dens with blood. The lights had been extinguished at the beginning of the strife, but a blazing fire of pine logs illuminated even the furthest corners of the room. Tables, glasses, decanters, household utensils, and stools had been overturned, thrown in every direction, trodden upon, shivered into fragments. Near the fireplace two men lay stretched upon the floor. They were lying motionless upon their backs, with their arms crossed. A third was extended in the middle of the room. A woman crouched upon the lower steps of a staircase leading to the floor above. She had thrown her apron over her head, and was uttering inarticulate moans. Finally, facing the police, and with his back turned to an open door leading into an adjoining room, stood a young man, in front of whom a heavy oaken table formed, as it were, a rampart.

He was of medium stature, and wore a full beard. His clothes, not unlike those of a railway porter, were torn to fragments, and soiled with dust and wine and blood. This certainly

was the murderer. The expression on his face was terrible. A mad fury blazed in his eyes, and a convulsive sneer distorted his features. On his neck and cheek were two wounds which bled profusely. In his right hand, covered with a handkerchief, he held a pistol, which he aimed at the intruders.

"Surrender!" cried Gevrol.

The man's lips moved, but in spite of a visible effort he could not articulate a syllable.

"Don't do any mischief," continued the inspector, "we are in force, you can not escape; so lay down your arms."

"I am innocent," exclaimed the man, in a hoarse, strained voice.

"Naturally, but we do not see it."

"I have been attacked; ask that old woman. I defended myself; I have killed—I had a right to do so; it was in self-defense!"

The gesture with which he enforced these words was so menacing that one of the agents drew Gevrol violently aside, saying, as he did so; "Take care, General, take care! The revolver has five barrels, and we have heard but two shots."

But the inspector was inaccessible to fear; he freed himself from the grasp of his subordinate and again stepped forward, speaking in a still calmer tone. "No foolishness, my lad; if your case is a good one, which is possible, after all, don't spoil it."

A frightful indecision betrayed itself on the young man's features. He held Gevrol's life at the end of his finger, was he about to press the trigger? No, he suddenly threw his weapon to the floor, exclaiming: "Come and take me!" And turning as he spoke he darted into the adjoining room, hoping doubtless to escape by some means of egress which he knew of.

Gevrol had expected this movement. He sprang after him with outstretched arms, but the table retarded his pursuit. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "the wretch escapes us!"

But the fate of the fugitive was already decided. While Gevrol parleyed, one of the agents—he who had peered through the shutters—had gone to the rear of the house and effected an entrance through the back door. As the murderer darted out, this man sprang upon him, seized him, and with surprising strength and agility dragged him back. The murderer tried to resist; but in vain. He had lost his strength: he tottered

and fell upon the table that had momentarily protected him, murmuring loud enough for every one to hear: "Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

This simple and decisive maneuvre on the part of the subordinate had won the victory, and at first it greatly delighted the inspector. "Good, my boy," said he, "very good! Ah! you have a talent for your business, and you will do well if ever an opportunity—"

But he checked himself; all his followers so evidently shared his enthusiasm that a feeling of jealousy overcame him. He felt his prestige diminishing, and hastened to add: "The idea had occurred to me; but I could not give the order without warning the scoundrel himself."

This remark was superfluous. All the police agents had now gathered around the murderer. They began by binding his feet and hands, and then fastened him securely to a chair. He offered no resistance. His wild excitement had given place to that gloomy prostration that follows all unnatural efforts, either of mind or body. Evidently he had abandoned himself to his fate.

When Gevrol saw that the men had finished their task, he called on them to attend to the other inmates of the den, and in addition ordered the lamps to be lit for the fire was going out. The inspector began his examination with the two men lying near the fireplace. He laid his hand on their hearts, but no pulsations were to be detected. He then held the face of his watch close to their lips, but the glass remained quite clear. "Useless," he murmured, after several trials, "useless; they are dead! They will never see morning again. Leave them in the same position until the arrival of the public prosecutor, and let us look at the other one."

The third man still breathed. He was a young fellow, wearing the uniform of a common soldier of the line. He was unarmed, and his large bluish gray cloak was partly open, revealing his bare chest. The agents lifted him very carefully—for he groaned piteously at the slightest movement—and placed him in an upright position, with his back leaning against the wall. He soon opened his eyes, and in a faint voice asked for something to drink. They brought him a glass of water, which he drank with evident satisfaction. He then drew a long breath, and seemed to regain some little strength.

"Where are you wounded?" asked Gevrol.

"In the head, there," he responded, trying to raise one of his arms. "Oh! how I suffer."

The police agent, who had cut off the murderer's retreat now approached, and with a dexterity that an old surgeon might have envied, made an examination of the gaping wound which the young man had received in the back of the neck. "It is nothing," declared the police agent, but as he spoke there was no mistaking the movement of his lower lip. It was evident that he considered the wound very dangerous, probably mortal.

"It will be nothing," affirmed Gevrol in his turn; "wounds in the head, when they do not kill at once, are cured in a month."

The wounded man smiled sadly. "I have received my death blow," he murmured.

"Nonsense!"

"Oh! it is useless to say anything; I feel it, but I do not complain. I have only received my just deserts."

All the police agents turned toward the murderer on hearing these words, presuming that he would take advantage of this opportunity to repeat his protestations of innocence. But their expectations were disappointed; he did not speak, although he must certainly have heard the words.

"It was that brigand, Lacheneur, who enticed me here," continued the wounded man, in a voice that was growing fainter.

"Lacheneur?"

"Yes, Jean Lacheneur, a former actor, who knew me when I was rich—for I had a fortune, but I spent it all; I wished to amuse myself. He, knowing I was without a single sou in the world, came and promised me money enough to begin life over again. Fool that I was to believe him, for he brought me to die here like a dog! Oh! I will have my revenge on him!" At this thought the wounded man clenched his hands threateningly. "I will have my revenge," he resumed. "I know much more than he believes. I will reveal everything."

But he had presumed too much upon his strength. Anger had given him a moment's energy, but at the cost of his life which was ebbing away. When he again tried to speak, he could not. Twice did he open his lips, but only a choking cry of impotent rage escaped them. This was his last manifestation of intelligence. A bloody foam gathered upon his lips, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, his body stiffened, and he fell face downward in a terrible convulsion.

"It is over," murmured Gevrol.

"Not yet," replied the young police agent, who had shown himself so proficient; "but he can not live more than two minutes. Poor devil! he will say nothing."

The inspector of police had risen from the floor as if he had just witnessed the commonest incident in the world, and was carefully dusting the knees of his trousers. "Oh, well," he responded, "we shall know all we need to know. This fellow is a soldier, and the number of his regiment will be given on the buttons of his cloak."

A slight smile curved the lips of the subordinate. "I think you are mistaken, General," said he.

"How—"

"Yes, I understand. Seeing him attired in a military coat, you supposed—But no; this poor wretch was no soldier. Do you wish for an immediate proof? Is his hair the regulation cut? Where did you ever see soldiers with their hair falling over their shoulders?"

This objection silenced the General for a moment; but he replied bruskly: "Do you think that I keep my eyes in my pocket? What you have remarked did not escape my notice; only I said to myself, here is a young man who has profited by leave of absence to visit the wig maker."

"At least—"

But Gevrol would permit no more interruptions. "Enough talk," he declared. "We will now hear what has happened. Mother Chupin, the old hussy, is not dead!"

As he spoke, he advanced toward the old woman, who was still crouching upon the stairs. She had not moved nor ventured so much as a look since the entrance of the police, but her moans had not been discontinued. With a sudden movement, Gevrol tore off the apron which she had thrown over her head, and there she stood, such as years, vice, poverty, and drink had made her; wrinkled, shriveled, toothless, and haggard, her skin as yellow and as dry as parchment and drawn tightly over her bones.

"Come, stand up!" ordered the inspector. "Your lamentations don't affect me. You ought to be sent to prison for putting such vile drugs into your liquors thus breeding madness in the brains of your customers."

The old woman's little red eyes traveled slowly round the room, and then in tearful tones she exclaimed: "What a misfortune! what will become of me? Everything is broken—I am

ruined!" She only seemed impressed by the loss of her table utensils.

"Now tell us how this trouble began," said Gevrol.

"Alas! I know nothing about it. I was upstairs mending my son's clothes, when I heard a dispute."

"And after that?"

"Of course I came down, and I saw those three men that are lying there picking a quarrel with the young man you have arrested; the poor innocent! For he is innocent, as truly as I am an honest woman. If my son Polyte had been here he would have separated them; but I, a poor widow, what could I do! I cried 'Police!' with all my might."

After giving this testimony she resumed her seat, thinking she had said enough. But Gevrol rudely ordered her to stand up again. "Oh! we have not done," said he. "I wish for other particulars."

"What particulars, dear Monsieur Gevrol, since I saw nothing?"

Anger crimsoned the inspector's ears. "What would you say, old woman, if I arrested you?"

"It would be a great piece of injustice."

"Nevertheless, it is what will happen if you persist in remaining silent. I have an idea that a fortnight in Saint Lazare would untie your tongue."

These words produced the effect of an electric shock on the Widow Chupin. She suddenly ceased her hypocritical lamentations, rose, placed her hands defiantly on her hips, and poured forth a torrent of invective upon Gevrol and his agents, accusing them of persecuting her family ever since they had previously arrested her son, a good-for-nothing fellow. Finally, she swore that she was not afraid of prison, and would be only too glad to end her days in jail beyond the reach of want.

At first the General tried to impose silence upon the terrible termagant: but he soon discovered that he was powerless; besides, all his subordinates were laughing. Accordingly he turned his back upon her, and, advancing toward the murderer, he said: "You, at least, will not refuse an explanation."

The man hesitated for a moment. "I have already said all that I have to say," he replied, at last. "I have told you that I am innocent; and this woman and a man on the point of death who was struck down by my hand, have both confirmed my declaration. What more do you desire? When the judge

questions me, I will, perhaps, reply; until then do not expect another word from me."

It was easy to see that the fellow's resolution was irrevocable; and that he was not to be daunted by any inspector of police. Criminals frequently preserve an absolute silence, from the very moment they are captured. These men are experienced and shrewd, and lawyers and judges pass many sleepless nights on their account. They have learned that a system of defense can not be improvised at once; that it is, on the contrary, a work of patience and meditation; and knowing what a terrible effect an apparently insignificant response drawn from them at the moment of detection may produce on a court of justice, they remain obstinately silent. So as to see whether the present culprit was an old hand or not, Gevrol was about to insist on a full explanation when some one announced that the soldier had just breathed his last.

"As that is so, my boys," the inspector remarked, "two of you will remain here, and I will leave with the others. I shall go and arouse the commissary of police, and inform him of the affair; he will take the matter in hand: and we can then do whatever he commands. My responsibility will be over, in any case. So untie our prisoner's legs and bind Mother Chupin's hands, and we will drop them both at the station-house as we pass."

The men hastened to obey, with the exception of the youngest among them, the same who had won the General's passing praise. He approached his chief, and motioning that he desired to speak with him, drew him outside the door. When they were a few steps from the house, Gevrol asked him what he wanted.

"I wish to know, General, what you think of this affair."

"I think, my boy, that four scoundrels encountered each other in this vile den. They began to quarrel; and from words they came to blows. One of them had a revolver, and he killed the others. It is as clear as daylight. According to his antecedents, and according to the antecedents of the victims, the assassin will be judged. Perhaps society owes him some thanks."

"And you think that any investigation—any further search is unnecessary."

"Entirely unnecessary."

The younger man appeared to deliberate for a moment. "It seems to me, General," he at length replied, "that this affair

is not perfectly clear. Have you noticed the murderer, remarked his demeanor, and observed his look? Have you been surprised as I have been—?"

"By what?"

"Ah, well! it seems to me—I may, of course, be mistaken—but I fancy that appearances are deceitful, and— Yes, I suspect something."

"Bah!—explain yourself, please."

"How can you explain the dog's faculty of scent?"

Gevrol shrugged his shoulders. "In short, he replied, "you scent a melodrama here—a rendezvous of gentlemen in disguise, here at the Poivriere, at Mother Chupin's house. Well, hunt after the mystery, my boy; search all you like, you have my permission."

"What! you will allow me?"

"I not only allow you, I order you to do it. You are going to remain here with any one of your comrades you may select. And if you find anything that I have not seen, I will allow you to buy me a pair of spectacles."

II

THE young police agent to whom Gevrol abandoned what he thought an unnecessary investigation was a débutant in his profession. His name was Lecoq. He was some twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, almost beardless, very pale, with red lips, and an abundance of wavy black hair. He was rather short but well proportioned; and each of his movements betrayed unusual energy. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance, if we except his eyes, which sparkled brilliantly or grew extremely dull, according to his mood; and his nose, the large full nostrils of which had a surprising mobility.

The son of a respectable, well-to-do Norman family, Lecoq had received a good and solid education. He was prosecuting his law studies in Paris, when in the same week, blow following blow, he learned that his father had died, financially ruined, and that his mother had survived him only a few hours. He

was left alone in the world, destitute of resources, obliged to earn his living. But how? He had an opportunity of learning his true value, and found that it amounted to nothing; for the university, on bestowing its diploma of bachelor, does not give an annuity with it. Hence of what use is a college education to a poor orphan boy? He envied the lot of those who, with a trade at the ends of their fingers, could boldly enter the office of any manufacturer, and say: "I would like to work." Such men were working and eating. Lecoq sought bread by all the methods employed by people who are in reduced circumstances! Fruitless labor! There are a hundred thousand people in Paris who have seen better days. No matter! He gave proofs of undaunted energy. He gave lessons, and copied documents for a lawyer. He made his appearance in a new character almost every day, and left no means untried to earn an honest livelihood. At last he obtained employment from a well-known astronomer, the Baron Moser, and spent his days in solving bewildering and intricate problems, at the rate of a hundred francs a month.

But a season of discouragement came. After five years of constant toil, he found himself at the same point from which he had started. He was nearly crazed with rage and disappointment when he recapitulated his blighted hopes, his fruitless efforts, and the insults he had endured. The past had been sad, the present was intolerable, the future threatened to be terrible. Condemned to constant privations, he tried to escape from the horrors of his real life by taking refuge in dreams.

Alone in his garret, after a day of unremitting toil, assailed by the thousand longings of youth, Lecoq endeavored to devise some means of suddenly making himself rich. All reasonable methods being beyond his reach, it was not long before he was engaged in devising the worst expedients. In short, this naturally moral and honest young man spent much of his time in perpetrating—in fancy—the most abominable crimes. Sometimes he himself was frightened by the work of his imagination: for an hour of recklessness might suffice to make him pass from the idea to the fact, from theory to practise. This is the case with all monomaniacs; an hour comes in which the strange conceptions that have filled their brains can be no longer held in check.

One day he could not refrain from exposing to his patron a little plan he had conceived, which would enable him to obtain

five or six hundred francs from London. Two letters and a telegram were all that was necessary, and the game was won. It was impossible to fail, and there was no danger of arousing suspicion.

The astronomer, amazed at the simplicity of the plan, could but admire it. On reflection, however, he concluded that it would not be prudent for him to retain so ingenious a secretary in his service. This was why, on the following day, he gave him a month's pay in advance, and dismissed him, saying: "When one has your disposition, and is poor, one may either become a famous thief or a great detective. Choose."

Lecoq retired in confusion; but the astronomer's words bore fruit in his mind. "Why should I not follow good advice?" he asked himself. Police service did not inspire him with repugnance—far from it. He had often admired that mysterious power whose hand is everywhere, and which, although unseen and unheard, still manages to hear and see everything. He was delighted with the prospect of being the instrument of such a power. He considered that the profession of detective would enable him to employ the talents with which he had been endowed in a useful and honorable fashion; besides opening out a life of thrilling adventure with fame as its goal.

In short, this profession had a wonderful charm for him. So much so, that on the following week, thanks to a letter from Baron Moser, he was admitted into the service. A cruel disenchantment awaited him. He had seen the results, but not the means. His surprise was like that of a simple-minded frequenter of the theatre, when he is admitted for the first time behind the scenes, and is able to pry into the decorations and tinsel that are so dazzling at a distance.

However, the opportunity for which he had so ardently longed, for which he had been waiting during many weary months, had come, he thought, at last, as he reached the Poivriere with Gevrol and the other police agents. While he was clinging to the window shutters he saw by the light of his ambition a pathway to success. It was at first only a presentiment, but it soon became a supposition, and then a conviction based upon actual facts, which had escaped his companions, but which he had observed and carefully noted. He recognized that fortune had, at last, turned in his favor when he saw Gevrol neglect all but the merest formalities of examination, and when he heard him declare peremptorily that this triple

murder was merely the result of one of those ferocious quarrels so frequent among vagrants in the outskirts of the city.

"Ah, well!" he thought; "have it your own way—trust in appearances, since you will see nothing beneath them! But I will prove to you that my youthful theory is better than all your experience."

The inspector's carelessness gave Lecoq a perfect right to secretly seek information on his own account; but by warning his superior officers before attempting anything on his own responsibility, he would protect himself against any accusation of ambition or of unduly taking advantage of his comrade. Such charges might prove most dangerous for his future prospects in a profession where so much rivalry is seen, and where wounded vanity has so many opportunities to avenge itself by resorting to all sorts of petty treason. Accordingly, he spoke to his superior officer—saying just enough to be able to remark, in case of success: "Ah! I warned you!"—just enough so as *not* to dispel any of Gevrol's doubts.

The permission which Lecoq obtained to remain in charge of the bodies was his first triumph of the best possible augury; but he knew how to dissimulate, and it was in a tone of the utmost indifference that he requested one of his comrades to remain with him. Then, while the others were making ready to depart, he seated himself upon the corner of the table, apparently oblivious of all that was passing around. He did not dare to lift his head, for fear of betraying his joy, so much did he fear that his companions might read his hopes and plans in the expression of his face.

Inwardly he was wild with impatience. Though the murderer submitted with good grace to the precautions that were taken to prevent his escape, it required some time to bind the hands of the Widow Chupin, who fought and howled as if they were burning her alive. "They will never go!" Lecoq murmured to himself.

They did so at last, however. Gevrol gave the order to start, and left the house, addressing a laughing good-by to his subordinate. The latter made no reply. He followed his comrades as far as the threshold to make sure that they were really going, for he trembled at the thought that Gevrol might reflect, change his mind, and return to solve the mystery, as was his right.

His anxiety was needless, however. The squad gradually faded away in the distance, and the cries of Widow Chupin

died away in the stillness of the night. It was only then that Lecoq reentered the room. He could no longer conceal his delight; his eyes sparkled as might those of a conqueror taking possession of some vast empire: he stamped his foot upon the floor and exclaimed with exultation: "Now the mystery belongs to us two alone!"

Authorized by Gevrol to choose one of his comrades to remain with him at the Poivriere, Lecoq had requested the least intelligent of the party to keep him company. He was not influenced by a fear of being obliged to share the fruits of success with his companion, but by the necessity of having an assistant from whom he could, in case of need, exact implicit obedience.

The comrade Lecoq selected was a man of about fifty, who, after a term of cavalry service, had become an agent of the prefecture. In the humble office that he occupied he had seen prefect succeed prefect, and might probably have filled an entire prison with the culprits he had arrested with his own hands. Experience had not, however, made him any the shrewder or any the more zealous. Still he had this merit, when he received an order he executed it with military exactitude, so far as he understood it. Of course if he had failed to understand it, so much the worse. It might, indeed, be said of him, that he discharged his duties like a blind man, like an old horse trained for a riding school.

When he had a moment's leisure, and a little money in his pocket, he invariably got drunk. Indeed, he spent his life between two fits of intoxication, without ever rising above a condition of semi-lucidity. His comrades had known, but had forgotten, his name, and his partiality for a certain beverage had accordingly induced them to call him "Father Absinthe."

With his limited powers of observation, he naturally did not observe the tone of triumph in his young companion's voice. "Upon my word," he remarked, when they were alone, "your idea of keeping me here was a good one, and I thank you for it. While the others spend the night paddling about in the slush, I shall get a good sleep."

Here he stood, in a room that was splashed with blood, that was shuddering, so to speak, with crime, and yet face to face with the still warm bodies of three murdered men he could talk of sleep!

But, after all, what did it matter to him? He had seen so many similar scenes in his time. And does not habit infallibly

lead to professional indifference, making the soldier cool and composed in the midst of conflict, and rendering the surgeon impassible when the patient shrieks and writhes beneath his operating knife.

"I have been upstairs, looking about," pursued Father Absinthe; "I saw a bed up there, and we can mount guard here, by turns."

With an imperious gesture, Lecoq interrupted him. "You must give up that idea, Father Absinthe," he said, "we are not here to sleep, but to collect information—to make the most careful researches, and to note all the probabilities. In a few hours the commissary of police, the legal physician, and the public prosecutor will be here. I wish to have a report ready for them."

This proposition seemed anything but pleasing to the old police agent. "Eh! what is the use of that?" he exclaimed. "I know the General. When he goes in search of the commissary, as he has gone this evening, there is nothing more to be done. Do you think you can see anything that he didn't see?"

"I think that Gevrol, like every one else, is liable to be mistaken. I think that he believes too implicitly in what seems to him evidence. I could swear that this affair is not what it seems to be; and I am sure that if we like we can discover the mystery which is concealed beneath present appearances."

Although Lecoq's vehemence was intense, he did not succeed in making any impression upon his companion, who with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaws replied: "Perhaps you are right; but I am going to bed. This need not prevent you from searching around, however; and if you find anything you can wake me."

Lecoq made no sign of impatience: nor in reality was he impatient. These words afforded him the opportunity for which he was longing. "You will give me a moment first," he remarked. "In five minutes, by your watch, I promise to let you put your finger on the mystery that I suspect here."

"Well, go on for five minutes."

"After that you shall be free, Father Absinthe. Only it is clear that if I unravel the mystery alone, I alone ought to pocket the reward that a solution will certainly bring."

At the word "reward" the old police agent pricked up his ears. He was dazzled by the vision of an infinite number of bottles of the greenish liquor whose name he bore. "Convince

me, then," said he, taking a seat upon a stool, which he had lifted from the floor.

Lecoq remained standing in front of him. "To begin with," he remarked, "whom do you suppose the person we have just arrested to be?"

"A porter, probably, or a vagabond."

"That is to say, a man belonging to the lowest class of society: consequently, a fellow without education."

"Certainly."

Lecoq spoke with his eyes fixed upon those of his companion. He distrusted his own powers, as is usual with persons of real merit, but he felt that if he could succeed in making his convictions penetrate his comrade's obtuse mind, their exactitude would be virtually proved.

"And now," he continued, "what would you say if I showed you that this young man had received an excellent, even refined, education?"

"I should reply that it was very extraordinary. I should reply that—but what a fool I am! You have not proved it to me yet."

"But I can do so very easily. Do you remember the words that he uttered as he fell?"

"Yes, I remember them perfectly. He said: 'It is the Prussians who are coming.'"

"What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"What a question! I should suppose that he did not like the Prussians, and that he supposed he was offering us a terrible insult."

Lecoq was waiting anxiously for this response. "Ah, well; Father Absinthe," he said gravely, "you are wrong, quite wrong. And that this man has an education superior to his apparent position is proved by the fact that you did not understand his meaning, nor his intention. It was this single phrase that enlightened me."

Father Absinthe's physiognomy expressed the strange and comical perplexity of a man who is so thoroughly mystified that he knows not whether to laugh, or to be angry. After reflecting a little, he decided to adopt the latter course. "You are rather too young to impose upon an old fellow like me," he remarked. "I don't like boasters—"

"One moment!" interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to explain. You have certainly heard of a terrible battle which resulted

in one of the greatest defeats that ever happened to France—the battle of Waterloo?"

"I don't see the connection—"

"Answer, if you please."

"Yes—then! I have heard of it!"

"Very well; you must know then that for some time victory seemed likely to rest with the banners of France. The English began to fall back, and the emperor already exclaimed: "We have them!" when suddenly on the right, a little in the rear, a large body of troops was seen advancing. It was the Prussian army. The battle of Waterloo was lost."

In all his life, worthy Father Absinthe had never made such a strenuous effort to understand anything. In this case his perseverance was not wholly useless, for, springing from his stool, and probably in much the same tone that Archimedes cried *"Eureka!"* he exclaimed, "I understand. The man's words were only an illusion."

"It is as you have said," remarked Lecoq, approvingly. "But I had not finished. If the emperor was thrown into consternation by the appearance of the Prussians, it was because he was momentarily expecting the arrival of one of his own generals from the same direction—Grouchy—with thirty-five thousand men. So if this man's allusion was exact and complete, he was not expecting an enemy, but a friend. Now draw your own conclusions."

Father Absinthe was amazed but convinced: and his eyes, heavy with sleep a few moments before, now opened to their widest extent. "Good heavens!" he murmured, "if you put it in that way! But I forget; you must have seen something as you were looking through the shutters."

The young man shook his head. "Upon my honor," he reclared, "I saw nothing save the struggle between the murderer and the poor devil dressed as a soldier. It was that sentence alone that aroused my attention."

"Wonderful! prodigious!" exclaimed the astonished old man.

"I will add that reflection has confirmed my suspicions. I ask myself why this man, instead of flying at once, should have waited and remained there, at that door, to parley with us."

With a bound, Father Absinthe sprang again to his feet. "Why?" he interrupted; "because he had accomplices, and he wished to give them time to escape. Ah! I understand it all now."

A triumphant smile parted Lecoq's lips. "That is what I said to myself," he replied, "and now it is easy to verify my suspicions. There is snow outside, isn't there?"

It was not necessary to say any more. The elder officer seized the light, and followed by his companion, he hastened to the back door of the house, which opened into a small garden. In this sheltered enclosure the snow had not melted, and upon its white surface the dark stains of numerous footprints presented themselves. Without hesitation, Lecoq threw himself upon his knees in the snow; he rose again almost immediately. "These indentations were not made by the men's feet," said he. "There have been women here."

III

OBSTINATE men of Father Absinthe's stamp, who are at first always inclined to differ from other people's opinions, are the very individuals who end in madly adopting them. When an idea has at last penetrated their empty brains, they twist and turn it, dwell upon it, and develop it until it exceeds the the bounds of reason.

Hence, the police veteran was now much more strongly convinced than his companion that the usually clever Gevrol had been mistaken, and accordingly he laughed the inspector to scorn. On hearing Lecoq affirm that women had taken part in the horrible scene at the Poivriere, his joy was extreme—"A fine affair!" he exclaimed; "an excellent case!" And suddenly recollecting a maxim that has been handed down from the time of Cicero, he added in sententious tones: "Who holds the woman holds the cause!"

Lecoq did not deign to reply. He was standing upon the threshold, leaning against the framework of the door, his hand pressed to his forehead, as motionless as a statue. The discovery he had just made, and which so delighted Father Absinthe, filled him with consternation. It was the death of his hopes, the annihilation of the ingenious structure which his imagination had built upon the foundation of a single sentence.

There was no longer any mystery—, so celebrity was not to be gained by a brilliant stroke!

For the presence of two women in this vile den explained everything in the most natural and commonplace fashion. Their presence explained the quarrel, the testimony of Widow Chupin, the dying declaration of the pretended soldier. The behavior of the murderer was also explained. He had remained to cover the retreat of the two women; he had sacrificed himself in order to save them, an act of gallantry so common in the French character, that any scoundrel of the barrieres might have performed it.

Still, the strange allusion to the battle of Waterloo remained unexplained. But what did that prove now? Nothing, simply nothing. However, who could say how low an unworthy passion might cause a man even of birth and breeding to descend? And the carnival afforded an opportunity for the parties to disguise themselves.

But while Lecoq was turning and twisting all these probabilities in his mind, Father Absinthe became impatient. "Are we going to remain here until doomsday?" he asked. "Are we to pause just at the moment when our search has been productive of such brilliant results?"

"Brilliant results!" These words stung the young man as deeply as the keenest irony could have done. "Leave me alone," he replied gruffly; "and, above all, don't walk about the garden, as by doing so, you'll damage any footprints."

His companion swore a little; but soon became silent in his turn. He was constrained to submit to the irresistible ascendency of superior will and intelligence.

Lecoq was engaged in following out his course of reasoning. "The murderer, leaving the ball at the Rainbow, a dancing-house not far from here, near the fortifications, came to this wine-shop, accompanied by two women. He found three men drinking here, who either began teasing him, or who displayed too much gallantry toward his companions. He became angry. The others threatened him; he was one against three; he was armed; he became wild with rage, and fired—"

He checked himself, and an instant after added, aloud: "But was it the murderer who brought these women here? If he is tried, this will be the important point. It is necessary to obtain information regarding it."

He immediately went back into the house, closely followed

by his colleague, and began an examination of the footprints round about the door that Gevrol had forced open. Labor lost. There was but little snow on the ground near the entrance of the hovel, and so many persons had passed in and out that Lecoq could discover nothing. What a disappointment after his patient hopes! Lecoq could have cried with rage. He saw the opportunity for which he had sighed so long indefinitely postponed. He fancied he could hear Gevrol's coarse sarcasms. "Enough of this," he murmured, under his breath. "The General was right, and I am a fool!"

He was so positively convinced that one could do no more than discover the circumstances of some commonplace, vulgar broil, that he began to wonder if it would not be wise to renounce his search and take a nap, while awaiting the coming of the commissary of police.

But Father Absinthe was no longer of this opinion. This worthy man, who was far from suspecting the nature of his companion's reflections could not explain his inaction. "Come! my boy," said he, "have you lost your wits? This is losing time, it seems to me. The authorities will arrive in a few hours, and what report shall we be able to give them! As for me, if you desire to go to sleep, I shall pursue the investigation alone."

Disappointed as he was, the young police officer could not repress a smile. He recognized his own exhortation of a few moments before. It was the old man who had suddenly become intrepid. "To work, then!" he sighed, like a man who, while foreseeing defeat, wishes, at least, to have no cause for self-reproach.

He found it, however, extremely difficult to follow the footprints in the open air by the uncertain light of a candle, which was extinguished by the least breath of wind. "I wonder if there is a lantern in the house," he said. "If we could only lay our hands upon one!"

They searched everywhere, and, at last, upstairs in the Widow Chupin's own room, they found a well-trimmed lantern, so small and compact that it certainly had never been intended for honest purposes.

"A regular burglar's implement," said Father Absinthe, with a coarse laugh.

The implement was useful in any case; as both men agreed when they returned to the garden and recommenced their in-

vestigations systematically. They advanced very slowly and with extreme caution. The old man carefully held the lantern in the best position, while Lecoq, on his knees, studied each footprint with the attention of a chiromancer professing to read the future in the hand of a rich client. This new examination assured Lecoq that he had been correct in his first supposition. It was plain that two women had left the Poivriere by the back door. They had started off running, as was proved by the length of the steps and the shape of the footprints.

The difference in the tracks left by the two fugitives was so remarkable that it did not escape Father Absinthe's eyes. "Sapristi!" he muttered; "one of these jades can boast of having a pretty foot at the end of her leg!"

He was right. One of the tracks betrayed a small, coquettish, slender foot, clad in an elegant high-heeled boot with a narrow sole and an arched instep. The other denoted a broad, short foot growing wider toward the end. It had evidently been incased in a strong, low shoe.

This was indeed a clue. Lecoq's hopes at once revived; so eagerly does a man welcome any supposition that is in accordance with his desires. Trembling with anxiety, he went to examine some other footprints a short distance from these; and an excited exclamation at once escaped his lips.

"What is it?" eagerly inquired the other agent: "what do you see?"

"Come and look for yourself, see there!" cried Lecoq.

The old man bent down, and his surprise was so great that he almost dropped the lantern. "Oh!" said he in a stifled voice, "a man's footprint!"

"Exactly. And this fellow wore the finest of boots. See that imprint, how clear, how neat it is!"

Worthy Father Absinthe was scratching his ear furiously, his usual method of quickening his rather slow wits. "But it seems to me," he ventured to say at last, "that this individual was not coming *from* this ill-fated hovel."

"Of course not; the direction of the foot tells you that. No, he was not going away, he was coming here. But he did not pass beyond the spot where we are now standing. He was standing on tiptoe with outstretched neck and listening ears, when, on reaching this spot, he heard some noise, fear seized him, and he fled."

"Or rather, the women were going out as he was coming, and—"

"No, the women were outside the garden when he entered it."

This assertion seemed far too audacious to suit Lecoq's companion, who remarked: "One can not be sure of that."

"I am sure of it, however; and can prove it conclusively. If you doubt it, it is because your eyes are growing old. Bring your lantern a little nearer—yes, here it is—our man placed his large foot upon one of the marks made by the woman with the small foot and almost effaced it." This unexceptionable piece of circumstantial evidence stupefied the old police agent.

"Now," continued Lecoq, "could this man have been the accomplice whom the murderer was expecting? Might it not have been some strolling vagrant whose attention was attracted by the two pistol shots? This is what we must ascertain. And we will ascertain it. Come!"

A wooden fence of lattice-work, rather more than three feet high, was all that separated the Widow Chupin's garden from the waste land surrounding it. When Lecoq made the circuit of the house to cut off the murderer's escape he had encountered this obstacle, and, fearing lest he should arrive too late, he had leaped the fence to the great detriment of his pantaloons, without even asking himself if there was a gate or not. There was one, however—a light gate of lattice-work similar to the fence, turning upon iron hinges, and closed by a wooden button. Now it was straight toward this gate that these footprints in the snow led the two police agents. Some new thought must have struck the younger man, for he suddenly paused. "Ah!" he murmured, "these two women did not come to the Poivriere this evening for the first time."

"Why do you think that, my boy?" inquired Father Absinthe.

"I could almost swear it. How, unless they were in the habit of coming to this den, could they have been aware of the existence of this gate? Could they have discovered it on such a dark, foggy night? No; for I, who can, without boasting, say that I have good eyes—I did not see it."

"Ah! yes, that is true!"

"These two women, however, came here without hesitating, in a straight line; and note that to do this, it was necessary for them to cross the garden diagonally."

The veteran would have given something if he could have found some objection to offer; but unfortunately he could find

none. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "yours is a droll way of proceeding. You are only a conscript; I am a veteran in the service, and have assisted in more affairs of this sort than you are years old, but never have I seen—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, "you will see much more. For example, I can prove to you that although the women knew the exact position of the gate, the man knew it only by hearsay."

"The proof!"

"The fact is easily demonstrated. Study the man's footprints, and you, who are very sharp, will see at once that he deviated greatly from the straight course. He was in such doubt that he was obliged to search for the gate with his hand stretched out before him—and his fingers have left their imprint on the thin covering of snow that lies upon the upper railing of the fence."

The old man would have been glad to verify this statement for himself, as he said, but Lecoq was in a hurry. "Let us go on, let us go on!" said he. "You can verify my assertions some other time."

They left the garden and followed the footprints which led them toward the outer boulevards, inclining somewhat in the direction of the Rue de Patay. There was now no longer any need of close attention. No one save the fugitives had crossed this lonely waste since the last fall of snow. A child could have followed the track, so clear and distinct it was. Four series of footprints, very unlike in character, formed the track; two of these had evidently been left by the women; the other two, one going and one returning, had been made by the man. On several occasions the latter had placed his foot exactly on the footprints left by the two women, half effacing them, thus dispelling all doubt as to the precise moment of his approach.

About a hundred yards from the Poivriere, Lecoq suddenly seized his colleague's arm. "Halt!" he exclaimed, "we have reached a good place; I can see unmistakable proofs."

The spot, all unenclosed as it was, was evidently utilized by some builder for the storage of various kinds of lumber. The ground was strewn with large blocks of granite, some chiseled, some in the rough, with numerous long planks and logs of wood in their midst. In front of one of these logs, the surface of which had been evidently wiped, all the various footprints came together, mingling confusedly.

"Here," declared the young detective, "our fugitives met the man and took counsel with him. One of the women, the one with the little feet, sat down upon this log."

"We ought to make quite sure of that," said Father Absinthe, in an oracular tone.

But his companion cut short his desire for verification. "You, my old friend," said he, "are going to do me the kindness to keep perfectly still: pass me the lantern and do not move."

Lecoq's modest tone had suddenly become so imperious that his colleague dared offer no resistance. Like a soldier at the command to halt, he remained erect, motionless, and mute, following his colleague's movements with an inquisitive, wondering eye.

Quick in his motions, and understanding how to maneuvre the lantern in accordance with his wishes, the young police agent explored the surroundings in a very short space of time. A bloodhound in pursuit of his prey would have been less alert, less discerning, less agile. He came and went, now turning, now pausing, now retreating, now hurrying on again without any apparent reason; he scrutinized, he questioned every surrounding object: the ground, the logs of wood, the blocks of stone, in a word, nothing escaped his glance. For a moment he would remain standing, then fall upon his knees, and at times lie flat upon his stomach with his face so near the ground that his breath must have melted the snow. He had drawn a tape-line from his pocket, and using it with a carpenter's dexterity, he measured, measured, and measured.

And all his movements were accompanied with the wild gestures of a madman, interspersed with oaths or short laughs, with exclamations of disappointment or delight. After a quarter of an hour of this strange exercise, he turned to Father Absinthe, placed the lantern on a stone, wiped his hands with his pocket-handkerchief, and said: "Now I know everything!"

"Well, that is saying a great deal!"

"When I say everything, I mean all that is connected with the episode of the drama which ended in that bloody bout in the hovel. This expanse of earth covered with snow is a white page upon which the people we are in search of have written, not only their movements, their goings, and comings, but also their secret thoughts, their alternate hopes and anxieties. What do these footprints say to you, Papa Absinthe? To me they

are alive like the persons who made them; they breathe, speak, accuse!"

The old agent was saying to himself: "Certainly, this fellow is intelligent, undeniably shrewd; but he is very disagreeable."

"These are the facts as I have read them," pursued Lecoq. "When the murderer repaired to the Poivriere with the two women, his companion—I should say his accomplice—came here to wait. He was a tall man of middle age; he wore a soft hat and a shaggy brown overcoat; he was, moreover, probably married, or had been so, as he had a wedding-ring on the little finger of his right hand—"

His companion's despairing gestures obliged the speaker to pause. This description of a person whose existence had but just now been demonstrated, these precise details given in a tone of absolute certainty, completely upset all Father Absinthe's ideas, increasing his perplexity beyond all bounds.

"This is not right," he growled, "this is not kind. You are poking fun at me. I take the thing seriously; I listen to you, I obey you in everything, and then you mock me in this way. We find a clue, and instead of following it up, you stop to relate all these absurd stories."

"No," replied his companion, "I am not jesting, and I have told you nothing of which I am not absolutely sure, nothing that is not strictly and indisputably true."

"And you would have me believe—"

"Fear nothing, papa; I would not have you do violence to your convictions. When I have told you my reasons, and my means of information, you will laugh at the simplicity of the theory that seems so incomprehensible to you now."

"Go on, then," said the good man, in a tone of resignation.

"We had decided," rejoined Lecoq, "that the accomplice mounted guard here. The time seemed long, and, growing impatient, he paced to and fro—the length of this log of wood—occasionally pausing to listen. Hearing nothing, he stamped his foot, doubtless exclaiming: 'What the deuce has happened to him down there! He had made about thirty turns (I have counted them), when a sound broke the stillness—the two women were coming."

On hearing Lecoq's recital, all the conflicting sentiments that are awakened in a child's mind by a fairy tale—doubt, faith, anxiety, and hope—filled Father Absinthe's heart. What should he believe? what should he refuse to believe? He did not

know. How was he to separate the true from the false among all these equally surprising assertions? On the other hand, the gravity of his companion, which certainly was not feigned, dismissed all idea of pleasantry.

Finally, curiosity began to torture him. "We had reached the point where the women made their appearance," said he.

"Yes, indeed," responded Lecoq, "but here all certainty ceases; no more proofs, only suppositions. Still, I have every reason to believe that our fugitives left the drinking den before the beginning of the fight, before the cries that attracted our attention. Who were they? I can only conjecture. I suspect, however, that they were not equals in rank. I am inclined to think that one was the mistress, the other her servant."

"That is proved," ventured the old man, "by the great difference in their feet and in their shoes."

This shrewd observation elicited a smile from Lecoq. "That difference," he replied, seriously, "is something, of course; but it was not that which decided me in my opinion. If greater or less perfection of the extremities regulated social distinctions, many mistresses would be servants. What struck me was this: When the two women rushed wildly from Mother Chupin's house, the woman with the small feet sprang across the garden with one bound, she darted on some distance in advance of the other. The terror of the situation, the vileness of the den, the horror of the scandal, the thought of safety, inspired her with marvelous energy. But her strength, as often happens with delicate and nervous women, lasted only a few seconds. She was not half-way from the Poivriere when her speed relaxed, her limbs trembled. Ten steps farther on she tottered and almost fell. Some steps farther, and she became so exhausted that she let go her hold upon her skirts; they trailed upon the snow, tracing a faint circle there. Then the woman with the broad feet came to aid her. She seized her companion round the waist; she dragged her along; their footprints here are mingled confusedly; then, seeing that her friend was about to fall, she caught her up in her strong arms and carried her—for you will see that the footprints made by the woman with the small feet suddenly cease at this point."

Was Lecoq merely amusing himself by inventing this story? Was this scene anything but a work of imagination? Was the accent of deep and sincere conviction which he imparted to his words only feigned?

Father Absinthe was still in doubt, but he thought of a way in which he might satisfy his uncertainty. He caught up the lantern and hurried off to examine these footprints which he had not known how to read, which had been speechless to him, but which yielded their secret to another. He was obliged to agree with his companion. All that Lecoq had described was written there; he saw the confused footprints, the circle made by the sweeping skirts, the cessation of the tiny imprints.

On his return, his countenance betrayed a respectful and astonished admiration, and it was with a shade of embarrassment that he said: "You can scarcely blame an old man for being a little like St. Thomas. 'I have touched it with my fingers,' and now I am content to follow you."

The young police agent could not, indeed, blame his colleague for his incredulity. Resuming his recital, he continued: "Then the accomplice, who had heard the fugitives coming, ran to meet them, and he aided the woman with large feet in carrying her companion. The latter must have been really ill, for the accomplice took off his hat and used it in brushing the snow off this log. Then, thinking the surface was not yet *dry* enough, he wiped it with the skirt of his overcoat. Were these civilities pure gallantry, or the usual attentions of an inferior? I have asked myself that question. This much, however, is certain, while the woman with the small feet was recovering her strength, half reclining upon this board, the other took the accomplice a little on one side, five or six steps away to the left, just beside that enormous block of granite. There she talked with him, and, as he listened, the man leaned upon the snow-covered stone. His hand left a very distinct imprint there. Then, as the conversation continued, he rested his elbow upon the snowy surface."

Like all men of limited intelligence, Father Absinthe had suddenly passed from unreasoning distrust to unquestioning confidence. Henceforth, he could believe anything for the very same reason that had, at first, made him believe nothing. Having no idea of the bounds of human reasoning and penetration, he saw no limits to the conjectural genius of his companion. With perfect faith, therefore, he inquired: "And what was the accomplice saying to the woman with the broad shoes?"

Lecoq smiled at this simplicity, but the other did not see him do so. "It is rather difficult for me to answer that question," replied the young detective, "I think, however, that the woman

was explaining to the man the immensity and imminence of the danger that threatened his companion, and that they were trying to devise some means to rescue him from it. Perhaps she brought him orders given by the murderer. It is certain that she ended by beseeching the accomplice to run to the Poivriere and see what was passing there. And he did so, for his tracks start from this block of granite."

"And only to think," exclaimed Father Absinthe, "that we were in the hovel at that very moment. A word from Gevrol, and we might have had handcuffs on the whole gang! How unfortunate!"

Lecoq was not sufficiently disinterested to share his companion's regret. On the contrary, he was very thankful for Gevrol's blunder. Had it not been for that, how would he ever have found an opportunity of investigating an affair that grew more and more mysterious as his search proceeded, but which he hoped to fathom finally.

"To conclude," he resumed, "the accomplice soon returned, he had witnessed the scene, and was evidently afraid. He feared that the thought of exploring the premises might enter the minds of the police. It was to the lady with small feet that he addressed himself. He explained the necessity of flight, and told her that even a moment's delay might be fatal. At his words, she summoned all her energy; she rose and hastened away, clinging to the arm of her companion. Did the man indicate the route they were to take, or did they know it themselves? This much is certain, he accompanied them some distance, in order to watch over them. But besides protecting these women, he had a still more sacred duty to perform—that of succoring his accomplice, if possible. He retraced his steps, passed by here once more, and the last footprint that I can discover leads in the direction of the Rue du Chateau des Rentiers. He wished to know what would become of the murderer, and went to place himself where he might see him pass by with his captors.

Like a dilettante who can scarcely restrain his applause until the close of the *aria* that delights him, Father Absinthe had been unable during the recital to entirely suppress his admiration. But it was not until Lecoq ceased speaking that he gave full vent to his enthusiasm: "Here *is* a detective if you like!" he exclaimed. "And they pretend that Gevrol is a shrewd! What has he ever done to compare with this? Ah! shall I

tell you what I think? Why, in comparison with you, the General is a more John the Baptist."

Certainly the flattery was gross, but it was impossible to doubt its sincerity. This was the first time that the balmy dew of praise had fallen upon Lecoq's vanity, and it greatly delighted him, although he modestly replied: "Nonsense, you are too kind, papa. After all, what have I done that is so very clever? I told you that the man was of middle age. It was not difficult to see that after one had examined his heavy, dragging step. I told you that he was tall—an easy matter. When I saw that he had been leaning upon that block of granite there to the left, I measured the block in question. It is almost five feet five inches in height, consequently a man who could rest his elbow upon it must be at least six feet high. The mark of his hand proves that I am not mistaken. On seeing that he had brushed away the snow which covered the plank, I asked myself what he had used; I thought that it might be his cap, and the mark left by the peak proves that I was right. Finally, if I have discovered the color and the material of his overcoat, it is only because when he wiped the wet board, some splinters of the wood tore off a few tiny flakes of brown wool, which I have found, and which will figure in the trial. But what does this amount to, after all? Nothing. We have only discovered the first clues of the affair. Still, we are on the right scent —so, forward then!"

The old officer was electrified, and, like an echo, he repeated: "Forward!"

IV

THAT night the vagabonds, who had taken refuge in the neighborhood of the Poivriere, had a very bad time of it; for while those who managed to sleep were disturbed by frightful dreams of a police raid, those who remained awake witnessed some strange incidents, well calculated to fill their minds with terror. On hearing the shots fired inside Mother Chupin's drinking den, most of the vagrants concluded that there had

been a collision between the police and some of their comrades, and they immediately began prowling about, eagerly listening and watching, and ready to take flight at the least sign of danger. At first they could discover no particular reasons for alarm. But later on, at about two o'clock in the morning, just as they were beginning to feel secure again, the fog lifted a little, and they witnessed a phenomenon well calculated to arouse anxiety.

Upon the unoccupied tract of land, which the people of the neighborhood called the "plain," a small but very bright light was seen describing the most capricious evolutions. It moved here and there without any apparent aim, tracing the most inexplicable zigzags, sometimes sinking to the earth, sometimes rising to a height of four or five feet, at others remaining quite motionless, and the next second flying off like a ball. In spite of the place and the season of the year, the less ignorant among vagabonds believed the light to be some *ignis fatuus,* one of those luminous meteors that raise from the marshes and float about in the atmosphere at the bidding of the wind. In point of fact, however, this *ignis fatuus* was the lantern by the light of which the two police agents were pursuing their investigations.

After thus suddenly revealing his capacity to his first disciple, Lecoq found himself involved in a cruel perplexity. He had not the boldness and promptness of decision which is the gift of a prosperous past, and was hesitating between two courses, both equally reasonable, and both offering strong probabilities of success. He stood between two paths, that made by the two women on the one side, and that made by the accomplice on the other. Which should he take? For he could not hope to follow both. Seated upon the log where the women had rested a few moments before, with his hand pressed upon his forehead, he reflected and weighed the chances.

"If I follow the man I shall learn nothing that I do not know already. He has gone to hover round the party; he has followed them at a distance, he has seen them lock up his accomplice, and he is undoubtedly prowling round about the station house. If I hurried in pursuit, could I hope to overtake and capture him? No; too long a time has elapsed."

Father Absinthe listened to this monologue with intense curiosity, as anxious as an unsophisticated person who, having questioned a clairvoyant in regard to some lost articles, is waiting the oracle's response.

"To follow the women," continued the young man, "to what would that lead? Perhaps to an important discovery, perhaps to nothing."

However, he preferred the unknown, which, with all its chances of failure, had chances of success as well. He rose, his course was decided.

"Father Absinthe," said he, "we are going to follow the footprints of these two women, and wherever they lead us we will go."

Inspired with equal ardor they began their walk. At the end of the path upon which they had entered they fancied they observed, as in some magic glass, the one the fruits, the other the glory of success. They hurried forward. At first it was only play to follow the distinct footprints that led toward the Seine. But it was not long before they were obliged to proceed more slowly.

On leaving the waste ground they arrived at the outer limits of civilization, so to speak; and strange footprints mingled constantly with the footprints of the fugitives, at times even effacing them. In many spots, either on account of exposure or the nature of the soil, the thaw had completed its work, and there were large patches of ground entirely free from snow. In such cases they lost the trail, and it required all Lecoq's sagacity and all his companion's good-will to find it again.

On such occasions Father Absinthe planted his cane in the earth, near the last footprint that had been discovered, and Lecoq and himself hunted all over the ground around this point, much after the fashion of a couple of bloodhounds thrown off the scent. Then it was that the lantern moved about so strangely. More than a dozen times, in spite of all their efforts, they would have lost the clue entirely had it not been for the elegant shoes worn by the lady with the little feet. These had such small and extremely high heels that the impression they left could not be mistaken. They sank down three or four inches in the snow, or the mud, and their tell-tale impress remained as clear and distinct as that of a seal.

Thanks to these heels, the pursuers were able to discover that the two fugitives had not gone up the Rue de Patay, as might have been supposed. Probably they had considered this street too frequented, and too well lighted. They had only crossed it, just below the Rue de la Croix-Rouge, and had

profited by an empty space between two houses to regain the open ground.

"Certainly these women were well acquainted with the locality," murmured Lecoq.

Indeed, the topography of the district evidently had no secrets for them, for, on quitting the Rue de Patay, they had immediately turned to the right, so as to avoid several large excavations, from which a quantity of brick clay had been dug.

But at last the trail was recovered, and the detectives followed it as far as the Rue du Chevaleret. Here the footprints abruptly ceased. Lecoq discovered eight or ten footmarks left by the woman who wore the broad shoes, but that was all. Hereabout, moreover, the condition of the ground was not calculated to facilitate an exploration of this nature. There had been a great deal of passing to and fro in the Rue du Chevaleret, and not merely was there scarcely any snow left on the footpaths, but the middle of the street was transformed into a river of slush.

"Did these people recollect at last that the snow might betray them? Did they take the middle of the road?" grumbled the young police agent.

Certainly they could not have crossed to a vacant space as they had done just before, for on the other side of the street extended a long factory wall.

"Ah!" sighed Father Absinthe, "we have our labor for our pains."

But Lecoq possessed a temperament that refused to acknowledge defeat. Animated by the cold anger of a man who sees the object which he was about to seize disappear from before his eyes, he recommenced his search, and was well repaid for his efforts.

"I understand!" he cried suddenly, "I comprehend—I see!"

Father Absinthe drew near. *He* did not see nor divine anything! but he no longer doubted his companion's powers.

"Look there," said Lecoq; "what are those marks?"

"Marks left by the wheels of some carriage that plainly turned here."

"Very well, papa, these tracks explain everything. When they reached this spot, our fugitives saw the light of an approaching cab, which was returning from the centre of Paris. It was empty, and proved their salvation. They waited, and when it came nearer they hailed the driver. No doubt they

promised him a handsome fare; this is indeed evident, since he consented to go back again. He turned round here; they got into the vehicle, and that is why the footprints go no further."

This explanation did not please Lecoq's companion. "Have we made any great progress now that we know that?" he asked.

Lecoq could not restrain an impulse to shrug his shoulders. "Did you expect that the tracks made by the fugitives would lead us through Paris and up to their very doors?" he asked.

"No; but—"

"Then what would you ask more? Do you think that I shall not know how to find this driver to-morrow? He was returning with his empty vehicle, his day's work was ended; hence, his stable is in the neighborhood. Do you suppose that he will have forgotten that he took up two persons in the Rue du Chevaleret? He will tell us where he drove them; but that will not do us any good, for, of course, they will not have given him their real address. But at all events he can probably give us a description of them, tell us how they were dressed, describe their appearance, their manner, and their age. And with that, and what we already know—"

An eloquent gesture expressed the remainder of his thought, then he added: "We must now go back to the Poivriere, and go quickly. And you, my friend, may now extinguish your lantern."

While doing his best to keep pace with his companion, who was in such haste to get back to the Poivriere that he almost ran, Father Absinthe's thoughts were as busy as his legs, and an entirely new train of ideas was awakened in his mind.

During the twenty-five years that he had been connected with the police force, the good man—to use his own expression—had seen many of his colleagues walk over him and win, after only a few months' work, a promotion that his long years of service had not gained for him. In these cases he had not failed to accuse his superiors of injustice, and his fortunate rivals of gross flattery. In his opinion, seniority was the only claim to advancement—the only, the best, the most respectable claim; and he was wont to sum up all his opinions, all his grief and bitterness of mind in one phrase: "It is infamous to pass over an old member of the service."

To-night, however, Father Absinthe discovered that there is something else in the world besides seniority, and sufficient reasons for what he had formerly regarded as favoritism. He

secretly confessed that this newcomer whom he had treated so carelessly had just followed up a clue as he, veteran though he was, would never have succeeded in doing.

But communing with himself was not this good man's forte; he soon grew weary of reflection; and on reaching a place where they were obliged to proceed more slowly on account of the badness of the road, he deemed it a favorable opportunity to resume the conversation. "You are silent, comrade," he ventured to remark, "and one might swear that you were not exactly pleased."

This surprising result of the old man's reflections would have amazed Lecoq, if his mind had not been a hundred leagues away. "No, I am not pleased," he responded.

"And why, pray? Only ten minutes ago you were as gay as a lark."

"Then I did not see the misfortune that threatens us."

"A misfortune!"

"A very great misfortune. Do you not perceive that the weather has undesirably changed. It is evident that the wind is now coming from the south. The fog has disappeared, but the sky is cloudy and threatening. It will rain in less than an hour."

"A few drops are falling now; I just felt one."

These words produced on Lecoq much the same effect as a whip-up on a spirited horse. He sprang forward, and, adopting a still more hurried pace, exclaimed: "Let us make haste! let us make haste!"

The old police agent followed him as in duty bound; but his mind was, if possible, still more troubled by the replies of his young companion. A great misfortune! The wind from the south! Rain! He did not, he could not see the connection.

Greatly puzzled, and not a little anxious, Father Absinthe asked for an explanation, although he had but little more breath than was absolutely necessary to enable him to continue the forced march he was making. "Upon my word," said he, "I have racked my brains—"

His companion took pity on his anxiety. "What!" he exclaimed, as he still hastened forward, "you do not understand that our investigation, my success, and your reward, are dependent upon those black clouds which the wind is driving toward us!"

"Oh!"

"Twenty minutes of merely gentle rain, and our time and labor will be lost. If it rains, the snow will melt, and then farewell to our proofs. Let us get on—let us get on more quickly! You know very well that in such cases words don't suffice. If we declare to the public prosecutor that we have seen these footprints, he will ask, where? And what can we say? If we swear by all the gods that we have seen the footprints of a man and of two women, the investigating magistrate will say, 'Let me see them.' And who will feel sheepish then? Father Absinthe and Lecoq. Besides, Gevrol would not fail to declare that we were saying what was not true, in order to enhance our own value, and humiliate him."

"What an idea!"

"Faster, papa, faster; you will have all day to-morrow to be indignant. Perhaps it will not rain. In that case, these perfect, clear, and easily recognizable footprints will prove the culprits' ruin. How can we preserve them? By what process could we solidify them? I would deluge them with my blood if that could only cause them to congeal."

Father Absinthe was just then thinking that his share of the labor had hitherto been the least important; for he had merely held the lantern. But here was a chance for him to acquire a real and substantial right to the prospective reward. "I know a method," said he, "by which one could preserve these marks in the snow."

At these words the younger man stopped short. "You know —you?" he interrupted.

"Yes, I know," replied the old detective, with the evident satisfaction of a man who has gained his revenge. "They invented a way at the time of that affair at the Maison Blanche, last December."

"I recollect."

"Ah! well, on the snow in the courtyard there was a footprint that attracted a detective's attention. He said that the whole evidence depended on that mark alone, that it was worth more than ten years' hard work in following up the case. Naturally, he desired to preserve it. They sent for a great chemist—"

"Go on, go on."

"I have never seen the method put into prastise, but an expert told me all about it, and showed me the mold they obtained. He explained it to me precisely, on account of my profession."

Lecoq was trembling with impatience. "And how did they obtain the mold?" he asked abruptly.

"Wait: I was just going to explain. They take some of the best gelatine, and allow it to soak in cold water. When it becomes thoroughly softened, they heat it until it forms a liquid, of moderate consistency. Then when it is just cool enough, they pour a nice little covering of it upon the footprint.

Lecoq felt the irritation that is natural to a person who has just heard a bad joke, or who has lost his time in listening to a fool.

"Enough!" he interrupted, angrily. "That method can be found in all the manuals. It is excellent, no doubt, but how can it serve us? Have you any gelatine about you?"

"No."

"Nor have I. You might as well have counseled me to pour melted lead upon the footprints to fix them."

They continued their way, and five minutes later, without having exchanged another word, they reentered the Widow Chupin's hovel. The first impulse of the older man would have been to rest to breathe, but Lecoq did not give him time to do so.

"Make haste: get me a dish—a plate—anything!" cried the young detective, "and bring me some water; gather together all the boards and old boxes you can find lying about."

While his companion was obeying him, Lecoq armed himself with a fragment of one of the broken bottles, and began scraping away furiously at the plastered wall that separated the two rooms.

His mind disconcerted at first by the imminence of this unexpected catastrophe, a fall of rain, had now regained its equilibrium. He had reflected, he had thought of a way by which failure might possibly be averted—and he hoped for ultimate success. When he had accumulated some seven or eight handfuls of fine plaster dust, he mixed one-half with a little water so as to form a thin paste, leaving the rest untouched on the side of the plate.

"Now, papa," said he, "come and hold the light for me."

When in the garden, the young man sought for the deepest and most distinct of the footprints, knelt beside it, and began his experiment, trembling with anxiety. He first sprinkled upon the impression a fine coating of dry plaster, and then

upon this coating, with infinite care, he poured his liquid solution drop by drop.

What luck! the experiment was successful! The plaster united in a homogeneous mass, forming a perfect model of the impression. Thus, after an hour's labor, Lecoq possessed half a dozen of these casts, which might, perhaps, be a little wanting in clearness of outline, but which were quite perfect enough to be used as evidence.

The young detective's alarm had been well founded, for it was already beginning to rain. Still, he had plenty of time to cover a number of the footprints with the boxes and pieces of board which Father Absinthe had collected, thus placing them, as it were, beyond the reach of a thaw. Now he could breathe. The authorities might come, for the most important part of his task was completed.

V

IT was some distance from the Poivriere to the Rue de Chevaleret, even by way of the plain, and fully four hours had been occupied by Lecoq and his colleague in collecting their elements of information.

All this while, the Widow Chupin's abode had remained open, accessible to any chance visitor. Still, when, on his return, the young police agent remembered this neglect of elementary precautions, he did not feel alarmed. Considering all the circumstances, it was very difficult to believe that any serious harm could have resulted from this carelessness.

For who would have been likely to visit this drinking-den after midnight? Its bad name served the purpose of a bulwark. The most daring vagrants did not drink there without some disquietude, fearing that if the liquor caused them to lose consciousness, they might be robbed or perhaps even murdered. Hence, if any one had been attracted to this notoriously dangerous drinking-shop by the light that streamed through the open door, it could only have been some very reckless person returning late at night from the ball at the

Rainbow, with a few sous left in his pocket. But, even then, a single glance inside would have sufficed to put the bravest to flight.

In less than a second the young police agent had weighed all these possibilities, concerning which he did not breathe a word to Father Absinthe. When, little by little, the excitement caused by his successive hopes and disappointments, and by the accomplishment of the experiment with the footprints had died away, and he had regained his usual calm of mind, he made a careful inspection of the abode, and was by no means satisfied with himself. He had experimented upon Father Absinthe with his new system of investigation, just as an aspiring orator tries his powers before his least gifted friends, not before the cleverest. He had certainly overwhelmed the old veteran by his superiority; he had literally crushed him. But what great merit, what wonderful victory was this? Why should he boast of having outwitted Father Absinthe, one of the least sagacious men in the service?

If he could only have given some startling proofs of his energy or of his penetration! But, after all, what had he accomplished? Was the mystery solved? Was his success more than problematical? When one thread is drawn out, the skein is not untangled. This night would undoubtedly decide his future as a detective, so he swore that if he could not conquer his vanity, he would, at least, compel himself to conceal it. Hence, it was in a very modest tone that he said to his companion: "We have done all that we can do outside, now, would it not be wise to busy ourselves with the inside of the house?"

Everything looked exactly in the same state as when the two men left the room. A candle, with a charred smoking wick, cast its flickering light upon the same scene of disorder, revealing to view the rigid features of the three victims. Without losing a moment, Lecoq began to pick up and study the various objects scattered over the floor. Some of these still remained intact. The Widow Chupin had recoiled from the expense of a tiled floor, judging the bare ground upon which the cabin was built quite good enough for the feet of her customers. This ground, which must originally have been well beaten down, had, by constant use and damp, become well-nigh as muddy as the soil outside.

The first fruits of Lecoq's search were a large salad-bowl

and a big iron spoon, the latter so twisted and bent that it had evidently been used as a weapon during the conflict. On inspecting the bowl, it became evident that when the quarrel began the victims were regaling themselves with the familiar mixture of water, wine, and sugar, known round about the barrieres as *vin a la Française*. After the salad-bowl, the two men picked up five of the weighty glasses ordinarily used in wine-shops, and which, while looking as though they would contain half a bottle, are in point of fact so thick at the bottom that they hold next to nothing. Three of these glasses were broken, two were whole. All of them had contained wine—the same *vin a la Française*. This was plain, but for greater surety, Lecoq applied his tongue to the bluish mixture remaining in the bottom of each glass. "The deuce!" he muttered, with an astonished air.

Then he examined successively the surfaces of the three overturned tables. Upon one of these, the one nearest the fireplace and the window, the still wet marks of the five glasses, of the salad-bowl, and even of the spoons could be distinguished. Lecoq very properly regarded this circumstance as a matter of the greatest importance, for it proved clearly enough that five persons had emptied the salad-bowl in company. Who were these five persons?

"Oh! oh!" suddenly exclaimed Lecoq in two entirely different tones. "Then the two women could not have been with the murderer!"

A very simple mode of discovery had presented itself to his mind. It was to ascertain if there were any other glasses, and what they had contained. After a fresh search on the floor, a sixth glass was found, similar in form to the others, but much smaller. Its smell showed that it had contained brandy. Then these two women had not been with the murderer, and therefore he could not have fought because the other men had insulted them. This discovery proved the inaccuracy of Lecoq's original suppositions. It was an unexpected check, and he was mourning over it in silence, when Father Absinthe, who had not ceased ferreting about, uttered a cry of surprise.

The young man turned; he saw that his companion had become very pale. "What is it?" he asked.

"Some one has been here in our absence."

"Impossible!"

It was not impossible—it was true. When Gevrol had torn

the apron off Widow Chupin's head he had thrown it upon the steps of the stairs; neither of the police agents had since touched it. And yet the pockets of this apron were now turned inside out; this was a proof, this was evidence. At this discovery Lecoq was overcome with consternation, and the contraction of his features revealed the struggle going on in his mind. "Who could have been here?" he murmured. "Robbers? That is improbable."

Then, after a long silence which his companion took good care not to interrupt, he added: "The person who came here, who dared to penetrate into this abode and face the corpses of these murdered men—this person could have been none other than the accomplice. But it is not enough to suspect this, it is necessary to know it. I must—I will know it!"

They searched for a long time, and it was not until after an hour of earnest work that, in front of the door forced open by the police, they discovered in the mud, just inside the marks made by Gevrol's tread, a footprint that bore a close resemblance to those left by the man who had entered the garden. They compared the impressions and recognized the same designs formed by the nails upon the sole of the boot.

"It must have been the accomplice!" exclaimed Lecoq. "He watched us, he saw us go away, and then he entered. But why? What pressing, irresistible necessity made him decide to brave such imminent danger?" He seized his companion's hand, nearly crushing it in his excitement: "Ah! I know why!" continued he, violently. "I understand only too well. Some article that would have served to throw light on this horrible affair had been left or forgotten, or lost here, and to obtain it, to find it, he decided to run this terrible risk. And to think that it was my fault, my fault alone, that this convincing proof escaped us! And I thought myself so shrewd! What a lesson! The door should have been locked; any fool would have thought of it—" Here he checked himself, and remained with open mouth and distended eyes, pointing with his finger to one of the corners of the room.

"What is the matter?" asked his frightened companion.

Lecoq made no reply, but slowly, and with the stiff movements of a somnambulist, he approached the spot to which he had pointed, stooped, picked up something, and said: "My folly is not deserving of such luck."

The object he had found was an earring composed of a

single large diamond. The setting was of marvelous workmanship. "This diamond," declared Lecoq, after a moment's examination, "must be worth at least five or six thousand francs."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I think I could swear to it."

He would not have troubled about such a preamble as "I think" a few hours before, but the blunder he had made was a lesson that would not be forgotten so long as he lived.

"Perhaps it was that same diamond earring that the accomplice came to seek," ventured Father Absinthe.

"The supposition is scarcely admissible. In that case, he would not have sought for it in Mother Chupin's apron. No, he must have been seeking for something else—a letter, for example."

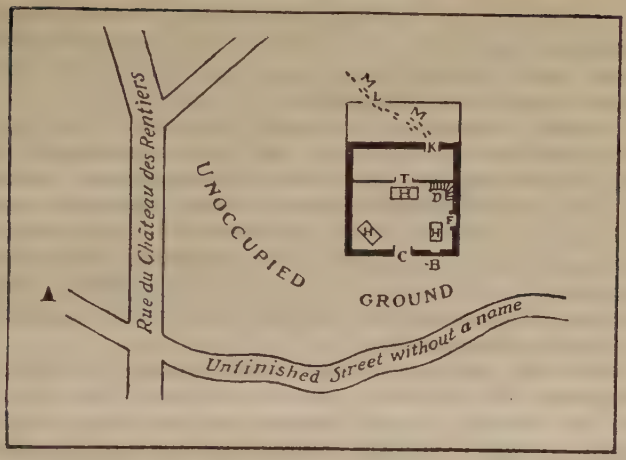
The older man was not listening; he had taken the earring, and was examining it in his turn. "And to think," he murmured, astonished by the brilliancy of the stone, "to think that a woman who had ten thousand francs' worth of jewels in her ears would have come to the Poivriere. Who would have believed it?"

Lecoq shook his head thoughtfully. "Yes, it is very strange, very improbable, very absurd. And yet we shall see many things quite as strange if we ever arrive—which I very much doubt—at a solution of this mysterious affair."

Day was breaking, cold, cheerless, and gloomy, when Lecoq and his colleague concluded their investigation. There was not an inch of space that had not been explored, carefully examined and studied, one might almost say, with a magnifying glass. There now only remained to draw up the report.

The younger man seated himself at the table, and, with the view of making his recital as intelligible as possible, he began by sketching a plan of the scene of the murder.

It will be seen that in the memoranda appended to this explanatory diagram, Lecoq had not once written his own name. In noting the things that he had imagined or discovered, he referred to himself simply as one of the police. This was not so much modesty as calculation. By hiding one's self on well-chosen occasions, one gains greater notoriety when one emerges from the shade. It was also through cunning that he gave Gevrol such a prominent position. These tactics, rather subtle, perhaps, but after all perfectly fair, could not fail to call atten-



A.—The point where the squad of police, under the command of Inspector Gevrol, heard the cries of the victims.

(The distance from this point to the wine-shop known as the Poivriere, is only one hundred and twenty-three yards; hence, it may reasonably be supposed that these cries were the first that were uttered, and consequently that the conflict had just commenced.)

B.—The window closed with shutters, through the cracks of which one of the police agents was able to see the scene within.

C.—The door forced open by Inspector Gevrol.

D.—The staircase upon which the Widow Chupin was seated, crying.

(It was upon the third step of this staircase that the Widow Chupin's apron was afterward found, the pockets turned inside out.)

F.—Fireplace.

HHH.—Tables.

(The remnants of the salad-bowl and of the five glasses were found scattered on the floor between the points F and B.)

T.—Door communicating with the back room of the hovel, before which the armed murderer was standing with the table H before him as a rampart.

K.—Back door of the hut, opening into the garden, by which the agent of police who thought of cutting off the murderer's retreat, entered and secured him.

L.—Gate of the garden, opening upon the unoccupied ground.

MM.—Footprints on the snow, discovered by the police agent remaining at the Poivriere, after the departure of Inspector Gevrol.

tion to the man who had shown himself so efficient when the efforts of his chief had been merely confined to breaking open the door.

The document Lecoq drew up was not a *proces-verbal,* a formal act reserved for the officers of judiciary police; it was a simple report, that would be admitted under the title of an inquiry, and yet the young detective composed it with quite as much care as a general would have displayed in drawing up the bulletin of his first victory.

While Lecoq was drawing and writing, Father Absinthe leaned over his shoulder to watch him. The plan amazed that worthy man. He had seen a great deal; but he had always supposed that it was necessary to be an engineer, an architect, or, at least, a carpenter, to execute such work. Not at all. With a tape-line with which to take some measurements, and a bit of board in place of a rule, his inexperienced colleague had soon accomplished the miracle. Father Absinthe's respect for Lecoq was thereby greatly augmented. It is true that the worthy veteran had not noticed the explosion of the young police agent's vanity, nor his return to his former modest demeanor. He had not observed his alarm, nor his perplexity, nor his lack of penetration.

After a few moments, Father Absinthe ceased watching his companion. He felt weary after the labors of the night, his head was burning, and he shivered and his knees trembled. Perhaps, though he was by no means sensitive, he felt the influence of the horrors that surrounded him, and which seemed more sinister than ever in the bleak light of morning. He began to ferret in the cupboards, and at last succeeded in discovering—oh, marvelous fortune!—a bottle of brandy, three parts full. He hesitated for an instant, then he poured out a glass, and drained it at a single draft.

"Will you have some?" he inquired of his companion. "It is not a very famous brand, to be sure; but it is just as good, it makes one's blood circulate and enlivens one."

Lecoq refused; he did not need to be enlivened. All his faculties were hard at work. He intended that, after a single perusal of his report, the investigating magistrate should say: "Let the officer who drew up this document be sent for." It must be remembered that Lecoq's future depended upon such an order. Accordingly, he took particular care to be brief, clear, and concise, to plainly indicate how his suspicions on the subject of the murder had been aroused, how they had increased, and how they had been confirmed. He explained by what series of deductions he had succeeded in establishing a theory which, if it was not the truth, was at least plausible enough to serve as the basis for further investigation.

Then he enumerated the articles of conviction ranged on the table before him. There were the flakes of brown wool collected upon the plank, the valuable earring, the models of the different footprints in the garden, and the Widow Chupin's

apron with its pockets turned inside out. There was also the murderer's revolver, with two barrels discharged and three still loaded. This weapon, although not of an ornamental character, was still a specimen of highly finished workmanship. It bore the name of one Stephens, 14 Skinner Street, a well-known London gunsmith.

Lecoq felt convinced that by examining the bodies of the victims he would obtain other and perhaps very valuable information; but he did not dare venture upon such a course. Besides his own inexperience in such a matter, there was Gevrol to be thought of, and the inspector, furious at his own mistake, would not fail to declare that, by changing the attitude of the bodies, Lecoq had rendered a satisfactory examination by the physicians impossible.

The young detective accordingly tried to console himself for his forced inaction in this respect, and he was rereading his report, modifying a few expressions, when Father Absinthe, who was standing upon the threshold of the outer door, called to him.

"Is there anything new?" asked Lecoq.

"Yes," was the reply. "Here come Gevrol and two of our comrades with the commissary of police and two other gentlemen."

It was, indeed, the commissary who was approaching, interested but not disturbed by this triple murder which was sure to make his arrondissement the subject of Parisian conversation during the next few days. Why, indeed, should he be troubled about it? For Gevrol, whose opinion in such matters might be regarded as an authority, had taken care to reassure him when he went to arouse him from his slumbers.

"It was only a fight between some old offenders; former jail birds, habitues of the Poivriere," he had said, adding sententiously: "If all these ruffians would kill one another, we might have some little peace."

He added that as the murderer had been arrested and placed in confinement, there was nothing urgent about the case. Accordingly, the commissary thought there was no harm in taking another nap and waiting until morning before beginning the inquiry. He had seen the murderer, reported the case to the prefecture, and now he was coming—leisurely enough—accompanied by two physicians, appointed by the authorities to draw up a medico-legal report in all such cases. The party also

comprised a sergeant-major of the 53d regiment of infantry of the line, who had been summoned by the commissary to identify, if possible, the murdered man who wore a uniform, for if one might believe the number engraved upon the buttons of his overcoat, he belonged to the 53d regiment, now stationed at the neighboring fort.

As the party approached it was evident that Inspector Gevrol was even less disturbed than the commissary. He whistled as he walked along, flourishing his cane, which never left his hand, and already laughing in his sleeve over the discomfiture of the presumptuous fool who had desired to remain to glean, where he, the experienced and skilful officer, had perceived nothing. As soon as he was within speaking distance, the inspector called to Father Absinthe, who, after warning Lecoq, remained on the threshold, leaning against the door-post, puffing his pipe, as immovable as a sphinx.

"Ah, well, old man!" cried Gevrol, "have you any great melodrama, very dark and very mysterious, to relate to us?"

"I have nothing to relate myself," replied the old detective, without even drawing his pipe from his lips, "I am too stupid, that is perfectly understood. But Monsieur Lecoq will tell you something that will astonish you."

The prefix, "monsieur," which the old police agent used in speaking of his colleague, displeased Gevrol so much that he pretended not to understand. "Who are you speaking of?" he asked abruptly.

"Of my colleague, of course, who is now busy finishing his report—of Monsieur Lecoq." Quite unintentionally, the worthy fellow had certainly become the young police agent's godfather. From that day forward, for his enemies as well as for his friends, he was and he remained "Monsieur" Lecoq.

"Ah! ah!" said the inspector, whose hearing was evidently impaired. "Ah, he has discovered—"

"The pot of roses which others did not scent, General." By this remark, Father Absinthe made an enemy of his superior officer. But he cared little for that: Lecoq had become his deity, and no matter what the future might reserve, the old veteran had resolved to follow his young colleague's fortunes.

"We'll see about that," murmured the inspector, mentally resolving to have an eye on this youth whom success might transform into a rival. He said no more, for the little party

which he preceded had now overtaken him, and he stood aside to make way for the commissary of police.

This commissary was far from being a novice. He had served for many years, and yet he could not repress a gesture of horror as he entered the Poivriere. The sergeant-major of the 53d, who followed him, an old soldier, decorated and medaled —who had smelt powder many scores of times—was still more overcome. He grew as pale as the corpses lying on the ground, and was obliged to lean against the wall for support. The two physicians alone retained their stoical indifference.

Lecoq had risen, his report in his hand; he bowed, and assuming a respectful attitude, was waiting to be questioned.

"You must have passed a frightful night," said the commissary, kindly; "and quite unnecessarily, since any investigation was superfluous."

"I think, however," replied the young police agent, having recourse to all his diplomacy, "that my time has not been entirely lost. I have acted according to the instructions of my superior officer; I have searched the premises thoroughly, and I have ascertained many things. I have, for example, acquired the certainty that the murderer had a friend, possibly an accomplice, of whom I can give quite a close description. He must have been of middle age, and wore, if I am not mistaken, a soft cap and a brown woolen overcoat: as for his boots—"

"Zounds!" exclaimed Gevrol, "and I—" He stopped short, like a man whose impulse had exceeded his discretion, and who would have gladly recalled his words.

"And you?" inquired the commissary, "pray, what do you mean?"

The inspector had gone too far to draw back, and, unwittingly, was now obliged to act as his own executioner. "I was about to mention," he said, "that this morning, an hour or so ago, while I was waiting for you, sir, before the station-house, at the Barrière d'Italie, where the murderer is confined, I noticed close by an individual whose appearance was not unlike that of the man described by Lecoq. This man seemed to be very intoxicated, for he reeled and staggered against the walls. He tried to cross the street, but fell down in the middle of it, in such a position that he would inevitably have been crushed by the first passing vehicle."

Lecoq turned away his head; he did not wish them to read in his eyes how perfectly he understood the whole game.

"Seeing this," pursued Gevrol, "I called two men and asked them to aid me in raising the poor devil. We went up to him; he had apparently fallen asleep: we shook him—we made him sit up; we told him that he could not remain there, but he immediately flew into a furious rage. He swore at us, threatened us, and began fighting us. And, on my word, we had to take him to the station-house, and leave him there to recover from the effects of his drunken debauch."

"Did you shut him up in the same cell with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Naturally. You know very well that there are only two cages in the station-house at the barrière—one for men and the other for women; consequently—"

The commissary seemed thoughtful. "Ah! that's very unfortunate," he stammered; "and there is no remedy."

"Excuse me, there is one," observed Gevrol, "I can send one of my men to the station-house with an order to detain the drunken man—"

Lecoq interposed with a gesture: "Trouble lost," he said coldly. "If this individual is an accomplice, he has got sober by now—rest assured of that, and is already far away."

"Then what is to be done?" asked the inspector, with an ironical air. "May one be permitted to ask the advice of Monsieur Lecoq."

"I think chance offered us a splendid opportunity, and we did not know how to seize it; and that the best thing we can do now is to give over mourning, and prepare to profit by the next opportunity that presents itself."

Gevrol was, however, determined to send one of his men to the station-house; and it was not until the messenger had started that Lecoq commenced the reading of his report. He read it rapidly, refraining as much as possible from placing the decisive proofs in strong relief, reserving these for his own benefit; but so strong was the logic of his deductions that he was frequently interrupted by approving remarks from the commissary and the two physicians.

Gevrol, who alone represented the opposition, shrugged his shoulders till they were well-nigh dislocated, and grew literally green with jealousy.

"I think that you alone, young man, have judged correctly in this affair," said the commissary when Lecoq had finished reading. "I may be mistaken; but your explanations have made

me alter my opinion concerning the murderer's attitude while I was questioning him (which was only for a moment). He refused, obstinately refused, to answer my questions, and wouldn't even give me his name."

The commissary was silent for a moment, reviewing the past circumstances in his mind, and it was in a serious tone that he eventually added: "We are, I feel convinced, in presence of one of those mysterious crimes the causes of which are beyond the reach of human sagacity—this strikes me as being one of those enigmatical cases which human justice never can reach."

Lecoq made no audible rejoinder; but he smiled to himself and thought: "We will see about that."

VI

NO consultation held at the bedside of a dying man ever took place in the presence of two physicians so utterly unlike each other as those who accompanied the commissary of police to the Poivriere.

One of them, a tall old man with a bald head, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, and an overcoat of antique cut, was evidently one of those modest *savants* encountered occasionally in the byways of Paris—one of those healers devoted to their art, who too often die in obscurity, after rendering immense services to mankind. He had the gracious calmness of a man who, having seen so much of human misery, has nothing left to learn, and no troubled conscience could have possibly sustained his searching glance, which was as keen as his lancet.

His colleague—young, fresh-looking, light-haired, and jovial—was somewhat foppishly attired; and his white hands were encased in handsome fur gloves. There was a soft self-satisfied smile on his face, and he had the manners of those practitioners who, for profit's sake, invariably recommend the infallible panaceas invented each month in chemical laboratories and advertised *ad nauseam* in the back pages of newspapers. He had probably written more than one article upon "Medicine for

the use of the people"; puffing various mixtures, pills, ointments, and plasters for the benefit of their respective inventors.

"I will request you, gentlemen," said the commissary of police, "to begin your duties by examining the victim who wears a military costume. Here is a sergeant-major summoned to answer a question of identity, whom I must send back to his quarters as soon as possible."

The two physicians responded with a gesture of assent, and aided by Father Absinthe and another agent of police, they lifted the body and laid it upon two tables, which had previously been placed end to end. They were not obliged to make any note of the attitude in which they found the body, since the unfortunate man, who was still alive when the police entered the cabin, had been moved before he expired.

"Approach, sergeant," ordered the commissary, "and look carefully at this man."

It was with very evident repugnance that the old soldier obeyed.

"What is the uniform that he wears?"

"It is the uniform of the 2d battalion of the 53d regiment of the line."

"Do you recognize him?"

"Not at all."

"Are you sure that he does not belong to your regiment?"

"I can not say for certain: there are some conscripts at the depot whom I have never seen. But I am ready to swear that he had never formed part of the 2d battalion—which, by the way, is mine, and in which I am sergeant-major."

Lecoq, who had hitherto remained in the background, now stepped forward. "It might be as well," he suggested, "to note the numbers marked on the other articles of clothing."

"That is a very good idea," said the commissary, approvingly.

"Here is his shako," added the young police agent. "It bears the number 3,129."

The officials followed Lecoq's advice, and soon discovered that each article of clothing worn by the unfortunate man bore a different number.

"The deuce!" murmured the sergeant; "there is every indication— But it is very singular."

Invited to consider what he was going to say, the brave trooper evidently made an effort to collect his intellectual faculties. "I would stake my epaulets that this fellow never

was a soldier," he said at last. "He must have disguised himself to take part in the Shrove Sunday carnival."

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, I know it better than I can explain it. I know it by his hair, by his nails, by his whole appearance, by a certain *je ne sais quoi;* in short, I know it by everything and by nothing. Why look, the poor devil did not even know how to put on his shoes; he has laced his gaiters wrong side outwards." Evidently further doubt was impossible after this evidence, which confirmed the truth of Lecoq's first remark to Inspector Gevrol.

"Still, if this person was a civilian, how could he have procured this clothing?" insisted the commissary. "Could he have borrowed it from the men in your company?"

"Yes, that is possible; but it is difficult to believe."

"Is there no way by which you could ascertain?"

"Oh! very easily. I have only to run over to the fort and order an inspection of clothing."

"Do so," approved the commissary; "it would be an excellent way of getting at the truth."

But Lecoq had just thought of a method quite as convincing, and much more prompt. "One word, sergeant," said he, "isn't cast off military clothing sold by public auction?"

"Yes; at least once a year, after the inspection."

"And are not the articles thus sold marked in some way?"

"Assuredly."

"Then see if there isn't some mark of the kind on this poor wretch's uniform."

The sergeant turned up the collar of the coat and examined the waist-band of the pantaloons. "You are right," he said, these are condemned garments."

The eyes of the young police agent sparkled. "We must then believe that the poor devil purchased this costume," he observed. "Where? Necessarily at the Temple, from one of the dealers in military clothing. There are only five or six of these establishments. I will go from one to another of them, and the person who sold these clothes will certainly recognize them by some trade mark."

"And that will assist us very much," growled Gevrol.

The sergeant-major, to his great relief, now received permission to retire, but not without having been warned that very probably the commissary would require his deposition.

The moment had come to search the garments of the pre-

tended soldier, and the commissary, who performed this duty himself, hoped that some clue as to the man's identity would be forthcoming. He proceeded with his task, at the same time dictating to one of the men a *proces-verbal* of the search; that is to say, a minute description of all the articles he found upon the dead man's person. In the right hand trousers pocket some tobacco, a pipe, and a few matches were found; in the left hand one, a linen handkerchief of good quality, but unmarked, and a soiled leather pocket-book, containing seven francs and sixty centimes.

There appeared to be nothing more, and the commissary was expressing his regret, when, on carefully examining the pocket-book he found a compartment which had at first escaped his notice, being hidden by a leather flap. This compartment contained a carefully folded paper. The commissary unfolded it and read the contents aloud:

"My dear Gustave,—To-morrow, Sunday evening, do not fail to come to the ball at the Rainbow, according to our agreement. If you have no money pass by my house, and I will leave some with the concierge, who will give it to you.

"Be at the ball by eight o'clock. If I am not already there, it will not be long before I make my appearance. Everything is going on satisfactorily. "LACHENEUR."

Alas! what did this letter reveal? Only that the dead man's name was Gustave; that he had some connection with a man named Lacheneur, who had advanced him money for a certain object; and that they had met at the Rainbow some hours before the murder.

It was little—very little—but still it was something. It was a clue; and in this absolute darkness even the faintest gleam of light was eagerly welcomed.

"Lacheneur!" growled Gevrol; "the poor devil uttered that name in his last agony."

"Precisely," insisted Father Absinthe, "and he declared that he wished to revenge himself upon him. He accused him of having drawn him into a trap. Unfortunately, death cut his story short."

Lecoq was silent. The commissary of police had handed him the letter, and he was studying it with the closest attention. The paper on which it was written was of the ordinary kind; the

ink was blue. In one of the corners was a half-effaced stamp, of which one could just distinguish the word—Beaumarchais.

This was enough for Lecoq. "This letter," he thought, "was certainly written in a café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. In which one? I must ascertain that point, for this Lacheneur must be found."

While the agents of the prefecture were gathered around the commissary, holding council and deliberating, the physicians began their delicate and disagreeable task. With the assistance of Father Absinthe, they removed the clothing of the pretended soldier, and then, with sleeves rolled up, they bent over their "subject" like surgeons in the schools of anatomy, and examined, inspected, and appraised him physically. Very willingly would the younger doctor have dispensed with these formalities, which he considered very ridiculous, and entirely unnecessary; but the old physician had too high a regard for his profession, and for the duty he had been called upon to fulfil, to neglect the slightest detail. Minutely, and with the most scrupulous exactitude, he noted the height of the dead man, his supposed age, the nature of his temperament, the color and length of his hair, and the degree of development of his muscular system.

Then the doctors passed to an examination of the wound. Lecoq had judged correctly. The medical men declared it to be a fracture of the base of the skull. It could, they stated, only have been caused by some instrument with a very broad surface, or by a violent knock of the head against some hard substance of considerable magnitude.

But no weapon, other than the revolver, had been found; and it was evidently not heavy enough to produce such a wound. There must, then, necessarily, have been a hand-to-hand struggle between the pretended soldier and the murderer; and the latter, seizing his adversary by the throat, had dashed him violently against the wall. The presence of some very tiny but very numerous spots of extravasated blood about the neck made this theory extremely plausible.

No other wound, not even a bruise or a scratch, was to be found. Hence, it became evident that this terrible struggle must have been exceedingly short. The murder of the pretended soldier must have been consummated between the moment when the squad of police heard the shrieks of despair and the moment when Lecoq peered through the shutter and saw the victim fall.

The examination of the other murdered man required different but even greater precautions than those adopted by the doctors in their inspection of the pseudo soldier. The position of these two victims had been respected; they were still lying across the hearth as they had fallen, and their attitude was a matter of great importance, since it might have decisive bearing on the case. Now, this attitude was such that one could not fail to be impressed with the idea that with both these men death had been instantaneous. They were both stretched out upon their backs, their limbs extended, and their hands wide open.

No contraction or extension of the muscles, no trace of conflict could be perceived; it seemed evident that they had been taken unawares, the more so as their faces expressed the most intense terror.

"Thus," said the old doctor, "we may reasonably suppose that they were stupefied by some entirely unexpected, strange, and frightful spectacle. I have come across this terrified expression depicted upon the faces of dead people more than once. I recollect noticing it upon the features of a woman who died suddenly from the shock she experienced when one of her neighbors, with the view of playing her a trick, entered her house disguised as a ghost."

Lecoq followed the physician's explanations, and tried to make them agree with the vague hypotheses that were revolving in his own brain. But who could these individuals be? Would they, in death, guard the secret of their identity, as the other victim had done?

The first subject examined by the physicians was over fifty years of age. His hair was very thin and quite gray and his face was closely shaven, excepting a thick tuft of hair on his rather prominent chin. He was very poorly clad, wearing a soiled woolen blouse and a pair of dilapidated trousers hanging in rags over his boots, which were very much trodden down at the heels. The old doctor declared that this man must have been instantly killed by a bullet. The size of the circular wound, the absence of blood around its edge, and the blackened and burnt state of the flesh demonstrated this fact with almost mathematical precision.

The great difference that exists in wounds made by firearms, according to the distance from which the death-dealing missile comes, was seen when the physicians began to examine the last

of the murdered men. The ball that had caused the latter's death had scarcely crossed a yard of space before reaching him, and his wound was not nearly so hideous in aspect as the other's. This individual, who was at least fifteen years younger than his companion, was short and remarkably ugly; his face, which was quite beardless, being pitted all over by the small-pox. His garb was such as is worn by the worst frequenters of the barrière. His trousers were of a gray checked material, and his blouse, turned back at the throat, was blue. It was noticed that his boots had been blackened quite recently. The smart glazed cap that lay on the floor beside him was in harmony with his carefully curled hair and gaudy necktie.

These were the only facts that the physicians' report set forth in technical terms, this was the only information obtained by the most careful investigation. The two men's pockets were explored and turned inside out; but they contained nothing that gave the slightest clue to their identity, either as regards name, social position, or profession. There was not even the slightest indication on any of these points, not a letter, nor an address, not a fragment of paper, nothing—not even such common articles of personal use, as a tobacco pouch, a knife, or a pipe which might be recognized, and thus establish the owner's identity. A little tobacco in a paper bag, a couple of pocket handkerchiefs that were unmarked, a packet of cigarettes—these were the only articles discovered beyond the money which the victims carried loose in their pockets. On this point, it should be mentioned that the elder man had sixty-seven francs about him, and the younger one, two louis.

Rarely had the police found themselves in the presence of so strange an affair, without the slightest clue to guide them. Of course, there was the fact itself, as evidenced by the bodies of the three victims; but the authorities were quite ignorant of the circumstances that had attended and of the motive that had inspired the crime. Certainly, they might hope with the powerful means of investigation at their disposal to finally arrive at the truth in the course of time, and after repeated efforts. But, in the mean while, all was mystery, and so strangely did the case present itself that it could not safely be said who was really responsible for the horrible tragedy at the Poivriere.

The murderer had certainly been arrested; but if he persisted in his obstinacy, how were they to ascertain his name? He protested that he had merely killed in self-defense. How could

it be shown that such was not the case? Nothing was known concerning the victims; one of whom had with his dying breath accused himself. Then again, an inexplicable influence tied the Widow Chupin's tongue. Two women, one of whom had lost an earring valued at 5,000 francs, had witnessed the struggle—then disappeared. An accomplice, after two acts of unheard-of audacity, had also made his escape. And all these people—the women, the murderer, the keeper of the saloon, the accomplice, and the victims—were equally strange and mysterious, equally liable *not* to be what they seemed.

Perhaps the commissary of police thought he would spend a very unpleasant quarter of an hour at the prefecture when he reported the case. Certainly, he spoke of the crime in a very despondent tone.

"It will now be best," he said at last, "to transport these three bodies to the Morgue. There they will doubtless be identified." He reflected for a moment, and then added: "And to think that one of these dead men is perhaps Lacheneur himself!"

"That is scarcely possible," said Lecoq. "The spurious soldier, being the last to die, had seen his companions fall. If he had supposed Lacheneur to be dead, he would not have spoken of vengeance."

Gevrol, who for the past two hours had pretended to pay no attention to the proceedings, now approached. He was not the man to yield even to the strongest evidence. "If Monsieur, the Commissary, will listen to me, he shall hear my opinion, which is a trifle more definite than M. Lecoq's fancies."

Before he could say any more, the sound of a vehicle stopping before the door of the cabin interrupted him, and an instant afterward the investigating magistrate entered the room.

All the officials assembled at the Poivriere knew at least by sight the magistrate who now made his appearance, and Gevrol, an old habitue of the Palais de Justice, mechanically murmured his name: "M. Maurice d'Escorval."

He was the son of that famous Baron d'Escorval, who, in 1815, sealed his devotion to the empire with his blood, and upon whom Napoleon, in the Memorial of St. Helena, pronounced this magnificent eulogium: "Men as honest as he may, I believe, exist; but more honest, no, it is not possible."

Having entered upon his duties as magistrate early in life,

and being endowed with remarkable talents, it was at first supposed that the younger D'Escorval would rise to the most exalted rank in his profession. But he had disappointed all such prognostications by resolutely refusing the more elevated positions that were offered to him, in order to retain his modest but useful functions in the public prosecutor's offices at Paris. To explain his repeated refusals, he said that life in the capital had more charms for him than the most enviable advancement in provincial centres. But it was hard to understand this declaration, for in spite of his brilliant connections and large fortune, he had, ever since the death of his eldest brother, led a most retired life, his existence merely being revealed by his untiring labors and the good he did to those around him.

He was now about forty-two years of age, but appeared much younger, although a few furrows already crossed his brow. One would have admired his face, had it not been for the puzzling immobility that marred its beauty, the sarcastic curl of his thin lips, and the gloomy expression of his pale-blue eyes. To say that he was cold and grave, did not express the truth, it was saying too little. He was gravity and coldness personified, with a shade of *hauteur* added.

Impressed by the horror of the scene the instant he placed his foot upon the threshold, M. d'Escorval acknowledged the presence of the physicians and the commissary by a slight nod of the head. The others in the room had no existence so far as he was concerned. At once his faculties went to work. He studied the ground, and carefully noted all the surroundings with the attentive sagacity of a magistrate who realizes the immense weight of even the slightest detail, and who fully appreciates the eloquence of circumstantial evidence.

"This is a serious affair," he said gravely; "very serious."

The commissary's only response was to lift his eyes to heaven. A gesture that plainly implied, "I quite agree with you!" The fact is, that for the past two hours the worthy commissary's responsibility had weighed heavily upon him, and he secretly blessed the investigating magistrate for relieving him of it.

"The public prosecutor was unable to accompany me," resumed M. d'Escorval, "he has not the gift of omnipresence, and I doubt if it will be possible for him to join me here. Let us, therefore, begin operations at once."

The curiosity of those present had become intense; and the commissary only expressed the general feeling when he said: "You have undoubtedly questioned the murderer, sir, and have learnt—"

"I have learnt nothing," interrupted M. d'Escorval, apparently much astonished at the interruption.

He took a chair and sat himself down, and while his clerk was busy in authenticating the commissary's *proces-verbal,* he began to read the report prepared by Lecoq.

Pale, agitated, and nervous, the young police agent tried to read upon the magistrate's impassive face the impression produced by the document. His future depended upon the magistrate's approval or disapproval; and it was not with a fuddled mind like that of Father Absinthe that he had now to deal, but with a superior intelligence.

"If I could only plead my own cause," he thought. "What are cold written phrases in comparison with spoken, living words, palpitating with emotion and imbued with the convictions of the speaker."

However, he was soon reassured. The magistrate's face retained its immobility, but again and again did M. d'Escorval nod his head in token of approval, and occasionally some point more ingenious than the others extorted from his lips the exclamations: "Not bad—very good!"

When he had finished the perusal he turned to the commissary and remarked: "All this is very unlike your report of this morning, which represented the affair as a low broil between a party of miserable vagabonds."

The observation was only too just and fair; and the commissary deeply regretted that he had trusted to Gevrol's representations, and remained in bed. "This morning," he responded evasively, "I only gave you my first impressions. These have been modified by subsequent researches, so that—"

"Oh!" interrupted the magistrate, "I did not intend to reproach you; on the contrary, I must congratulate you. One could not have done better nor acted more promptly. The investigation that has been carried out shows great penetration and research, and the results are given with unusual clearness, and wonderful precision."

Lecoq's head whirled.

The commissary hesitated for an instant. At first he was

sorely tempted to confiscate this praise to his own profit. If he drove away the unworthy thought, it was because he was an honest man, and more than that, because he was not displeased to have the opportunity to do Gevrol a bad turn and punish him for his presumptuous folly."

"I must confess," he said with some embarrassment, "that the merit of this investigation does not belong to me."

"To whom, then, shall I attribute it—to the inspector?" thought M. d'Escorval, not without surprise, for having occasionally employed Gevrol, he did not expect from him such ingenuity and sagacity as was displayed in this report. "Is it you, then, who have conducted this investigation so ably?" he asked.

"Upon my word, no!" responded Inspector Gevrol. "I, myself, am not so clever as all that. I content myself with telling what I actually discover; and I only give proofs when I have them in hand. May I be hung if the grounds of this report have any existence save in the brains of the man who imagined them." Perhaps the inspector really believed what he said, being one of those persons who are blinded by vanity to such a degree that, with the most convincing evidence before their eyes, they obstinately deny it.

"And yet," insisted the magistrate, "these women whose footprints have been detected must have existed. The accomplice who left the flakes of wool adhering to the plank is a real being. This earring is a positive, palpable proof."

Gevrol had hard work to refrain from shrugging his shoulders. "All this can be satisfactorily explained," he said, "without a search of twelve or fourteen hours. That the murderer had an accomplice is possible. The presence of the women is very natural. Wherever there are male thieves, you will find female thieves as well. As for the diamond—what does that prove? That the scoundrels had just met with a stroke of good luck, that they had come here to divide their booty, and that the quarrel arose from the division."

This was an explanation, and such a plausable one, that M. d'Escorval was silent, reflecting before he announced his decision. "Decidedly," he declared at last, "decidedly, I adopt the hypothesis set forth in the report. Who prepared it?"

Gevrol's face turned red with anger. "One of my men," he replied, "a clever, adroit fellow, Monsieur Lecoq. Come forward, Lecoq, that the magistrate may see you."

The young man advanced, his lips tightly compressed so as to conceal a smile of satisfaction which almost betrayed itself.

"My report, sir, is only a summary," he began, "but I have certain ideas—"

"Which you will acquaint me with, when I ask for them," interrupted the magistrate. And oblivious of Lecoq's chagrin, he drew from his clerk's portfolio two forms, which he filled up and handed to Gevrol, saying: "Here are two orders; take them to the station, where the murderer and the landlady of this cabin are confined, and have them conducted to the prefecture, where they will be privately examined."

Having given these directions, M. d'Escorval was turning toward the physicians, when Lecoq, at the risk of a second rebuff, interposed. "May I venture, sir, to beg of you to confide this message to me?" he asked of the investigating magistrate.

"Impossible, I may have need of you here."

"I desired, sir, to collect certain evidence and an opportunity to do so may not present itself again."

The magistrate perhaps fathomed the young man's motive. "Then, let it be so," he replied, "but after your task is completed you must wait for me at the prefecture, where I shall proceed as soon as I have finished here. You may go."

Lecoq did not wait for the order to be repeated. He snatched up the papers, and hastened away.

He literally flew over the ground, and strange to say he no longer experienced any fatigue from the labors of the preceding night. Never had he felt so strong and alert, either in body or mind. He was very hopeful of success. He had every confidence in himself, and his happiness would indeed have been complete if he had had another judge to deal with. But M. d'Escorval overawed him to such a degree that he became almost paralyzed in his presence. With what a disdainful glance the magistrate had surveyed him! With what an imperious tone he had imposed silence upon him—and that, too, when he had found his work deserving of commendation.

"Still, never mind," the young detective mentally exclaimed, "no one ever tastes perfect happiness here below."

And concentrating all his thoughts on the task before him, he hurried on his way.

VII

WHEN, after a rapid walk of twenty minutes, Lecoq reached the police station near the Barriere d'Italie, the door-keeper, with his pipe in his mouth, was pacing slowly to and fro before the guard-house. His thoughtful air, and the anxious glances he cast every now and then toward one of the little grated windows of the building sufficed to indicate that some very rare bird indeed had been entrusted to his keeping. As soon as he recognized Lecoq, his brow cleared, and he paused in his promenade.

"Ah, well!" he inquired, "what news do you bring?"

"I have an order to conduct the prisoners to the prefecture."

The keeper rubbed his hands, and his smile of satisfaction plainly implied that he felt a load the less on his shoulders.

"Capital! capital!" he exclaimed. "The Black Maria, the prison van, will pass here in less than an hour; we will throw them in, and hurry the driver off—"

Lecoq was obliged to interrupt the keeper's transports of satisfaction. "Are the prisoners alone?" he inquired.

"Quite alone: the woman in one cell, and the man in the other. This has been a remarkably quiet night, for Shrove Sunday! Quite surprising indeed! It is true your hunt was interrupted."

"You had a drunken man here, however."

"No—yes—that's true—this morning just at daybreak. A poor devil, who is under a great obligation to Gevrol."

The involuntary irony of this remark did not escape Lecoq. "Yes, under a great obligation, indeed!" he said with a derisive laugh.

"You may laugh as much as you like," retorted the keeper, "but such is really the case; if it hadn't been for Gevrol the man would certainly have been run over."

"And what has become of him?"

The keeper shrugged his shoulders. "You ask me too much," he responded. He was a worthy fellow who had been spending

the night at a friend's house, and on coming out into the open air, the wine flew into his head. He told us all about it when he got sober, half an hour afterward. I never saw a man so vexed as he was. He wept, and stammered: "The father of a family, and at my age too! Oh! it is shameful! What shall I say to my wife? What will the children think?"

"Did he talk much about his wife?"

"He talked about nothing else. He mentioned her name—Eudosia Leocadie, or some name of that sort. He declared that he should be ruined if we kept him here. He begged us to send for the commissary to go to his house, and when we set him free, I thought he would go mad with joy; he kissed our hands, and thanked us again and again!"

"And did you place him in the same cage as the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Of course."

"Then they talked with each other."

"Talked? Why, the drunkard was so 'gone,' I tell you, that he couldn't have said 'bread' distinctly. When he was placed in a cell, bang! He fell down like a log of wood. As soon as he recovered, we let him out. I'm sure, they didn't talk to each other."

The young police agent had grown very thoughtful. "I was evidently right," he murmured.

"What did you say?" inquired the keeper.

"Nothing," replied Lecoq, who was not inclined to communicate his reflections to the custodian of the guard-house. These reflections of his were by no means pleasant ones. "I was right," he thought; "this pretended drunkard was none other than the accomplice. He is evidently an adroit, audacious, cool-headed fellow. While we were tracking his footprints he was watching us. When we had got to some distance, he was bold enough to enter the hovel. Then he came here and compelled them to arrest him; and thanks to an assumption of childish simplicity, he succeeded in finding an opportunity to speak with the murderer. He played his part perfectly. Still, I know that he did play a part, and that is something. I know that one must believe exactly the opposite of what he said. He talked of his family, his wife and children—hence, he has neither children, wife, nor family."

Lecoq suddenly checked himself, remembering that he had no time to waste in conjectures. "What kind of fellow was this drunkard? he inquired.

"He was tall and stout, with full ruddy cheeks, a pair of white whiskers, small eyes, a broad flat nose, and a good-natured, jovial manner."

"How old would you suppose him to be?"

"Between forty and fifty."

"Did you form any idea of his profession?"

"It's my opinion, that what with his soft cap and his heavy brown overcoat, he must be either a clerk or the keeper of some little shop."

Having obtained this description, which agreed with the result of his investigations, Lecoq was about to enter the station house when a sudden thought brought him to a stand-still. "I hope this man has had no communication with this Widow Chupin!" he exclaimed.

The keeper laughed heartily. "How could he have had any?" he responded. "Isn't the old woman alone in her cell? Ah, the old wretch! She has been cursing and threatening ever since she arrived. Never in my whole life have I heard such language as she has used. It has been enough to make the very stones blush; even the drunken man was so shocked that he went to the grating in the door, and told her to be quiet."

Lecoq's glance and gesture were so expressive of impatience and wrath that the keeper paused in his recital much perturbed. "What is the matter?" he stammered. "Why are you angry?"

"Because," replied Lecoq, furiously, "because—" Not wishing to disclose the real cause of his anger, he entered the station house, saying that he wanted to see the prisoner.

Left alone, the keeper began to swear in his turn. "These police agents are all alike," he grumbled. "They question you, you tell them all they desire to know; and afterward, if you venture to ask them anything, they reply: 'nothing,' or 'because.' They have too much authority; it makes them proud."

Looking through the little latticed window in the door, by which the men on guard watch the prisoners, Lecoq eagerly examined the appearance of the assumed murderer. He was obliged to ask himself if this was really the same man he had seen some hours previously at the Poivriere, standing on the threshold of the inner door, and holding the whole squad of police agents in check by the intense fury of his attitude. Now, on the contrary, he seemed, as it were, the personification of weakness and despondency. He was seated on a bench opposite the grating in the door, his elbows resting on his knees, his chin

upon his hand, his under lip hanging low and his eyes fixed upon vacancy.

"No," murmured Lecoq, "no, this man is not what he seems to be."

So saying he entered the cell, the culprit raised his head, gave the detective an indifferent glance, but did not utter a word.

"Well, how goes it?" asked Lecoq.

"I am innocent!" responded the prisoner, in a hoarse, discordant voice.

"I hope so, I am sure—but that is for the magistrate to decide. I came to see if you wanted anything."

"No," replied the murderer, but a second later he changed his mind. "All the same," he said, "I shouldn't mind a crust and a drink of wine."

"You shall have them," replied Lecoq, who at once went out to forage in the neighborhood for eatables of some sort. In his opinion, if the murderer had asked for a drink after at first refusing to partake of anything, it was solely with the view of conveying the idea that he was really the kind of man he pretended to be.

At all events, whoever he might be, the prisoner ate with an excellent appetite. He then took up the large glass of wine that had been brought him, drained it slowly, and remarked: "That's capital! There can be nothing to beat that!"

This seeming satisfaction greatly disappointed Lecoq, who had selected, as a test, one of those horribly thick, bluish, nauseous mixtures in vogue around the barrieres—hoping, nay, almost expecting, that the murderer would not drink it without some sign of repugnance. And yet the contrary proved the case. However, the young detective had no time to ponder over the circumstance, for a rumble of wheels now announced the approach of that lugubrious vehicle, the Black Maria.

When the Widow Chupin was removed from her cell she fought and scratched and cried "Murder!" at the top of her voice; and it was only by sheer force that she was at length got into the van. Then it was that the officials turned to the assassin. Lecoq certainly expected some sign of repugnance now, and he watched the prisoner closely. But he was again doomed to disappointment. The culprit entered the vehicle in the most unconcerned manner, and took possession of his compartment like one accustomed to it, knowing the most comfortable position to assume in such close quarters.

"Ah! what an unfortunate morning," murmured Lecoq, disconsolately. "Still I will lie in wait for him at the prefecture."

When the door of the prison-van had been securely closed, the driver cracked his whip, and the sturdy horses started off at a brisk trot. Lecoq had taken his seat in front, between the driver and the guard; but his mind was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he heard nothing of their conversation, which was very jovial, although frequently interrupted by the shrill voice of the Widow Chupin, who sang and yelled her imprecations alternately.

It is needless, however, to recapitulate her oaths; let us rather follow the train of Lecoq's meditation. By what means could he secure some clue to the murderer's identity? He was still convinced that the prisoner must belong to the higher ranks of society. After all, it was not so extraordinary that he should have succeeded in feigning an appetite, that he should have concealed his distaste for a nauseous beverage, and that he should have entered the Black Maria without hesitation. Such conduct was quite possible, indeed almost probable on the part of a man, endowed with considerable strength of will, and realizing the imminence of his peril. But granting this, would he be equally able to hide his feelings when he was obliged to submit to the humiliating formalities that awaited him—formalities which in certain cases can, and must, be pushed even to the verge of insult and outrage?

No; Lecoq could not believe that this would be possible. He felt sure that the disgraceful position in which the prisoner would find himself would cause him to revolt, to lose his self-control, to utter some word that might give the desired clue.

It was not until the gloomy vehicle had turned off the Pont Neuf on to the Quai de l'Horloge that the young detective became conscious of what was transpiring around him. Soon the van passed through an open gateway, and drew up in a small, damp courtyard.

Lecoq immediately alighted, and opened the door of the compartment in which the supposed murderer was confined, exclaiming as he did so: "Here we are, get out." There was no fear of the prisoner escaping. The iron gate had been closed, and at least a dozen agents were standing near at hand, waiting to have a look at the new arrivals.

The prisoner slowly stepped to the ground. His expression

of face remained unchanged, and each gesture evinced the perfect indifference of a man accustomed to such ordeals.

Lecoq scrutinized his demeanor as attentively as an anatomist might have watched the action of a muscle. He noted that the prisoner seemed to experience a sensation of satisfaction directly his foot touched the pavement of the courtyard, that he drew a long breath, and then stretched and shook himself, as if to regain the elasticity of his limbs, cramped by confinement in the narrow compartment from which he had just emerged. Then he glanced around him, and a scarcely perceptible smile played upon his lips. One might have sworn that the place was familiar to him, that he was well acquainted with these high grim walls, these grated windows, these heavy doors—in short, with all the sinister belongings of a prison.

"Good Lord!" murmured Lecoq, greatly chagrined, "does he indeed recognize the place?"

And his sense of disappointment and disquietude increased when, without waiting for a word, a motion, or a sign, the prisoner turned toward one of the five or six doors that opened into the courtyard. Without an instant's hesitation he walked straight toward the very doorway he was expected to enter —Lecoq asked himself was it chance? But his amazement and disappointment increased tenfold when, after entering the gloomy corridor, he saw the culprit proceed some little distance, resolutely turn to the left, pass by the keeper's room, and finally enter the registrar's office. An old offender could not have done better.

Big drops of perspiration stood on Lecoq's forehead. "This man," thought he, "has certainly been here before; he knows the ropes."

The registrar's office was a large room heated almost to suffocation by an immense stove, and badly lighted by three small windows, the panes of which were covered with a thick coating of dust. There sat the clerk reading a newspaper, spread out over the open register—that fatal book in which are inscribed the names of all those whom misconduct, crime, misfortune, madness, or error have brought to these grim portals.

Three or four attendants, who were awaiting the hour for entering upon their duties, reclined half asleep upon the wooden benches that lined three sides of the room. These benches, with a couple of tables, and some dilapidated chairs, constituted the entire furniture of the office, in one corner of which stood a

measuring machine, under which each culprit was obliged to pass, the exact height of the prisoners being recorded in order that the description of their persons might be complete in every respect.

At the entrance of the culprit accompanied by Lecoq, the clerk raised his head. "Ah!" said he, "has the van arrived?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq. And showing the orders signed by M. d'Escorval, he added: "Here are this man's papers."

The registrar took the documents and read them. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "a triple assassination! Oh! oh!" The glance he gave the prisoner was positively deferential. This was no common culprit, no ordinary vagabond, no vulgar thief.

"The investigating magistrate orders a private examination," continued the clerk, "and I must get the prisoner other clothing, as the things he is wearing now will be used as evidence. Let some one go at once and tell the superintendent that the other occupants of the van must wait."

At this moment, the governor of the Depot entered the office. The clerk at once dipped his pen in the ink, and turning to the prisoner he asked: "What is your name?"

"May."

"Your Christian name?"

"I have none."

"What, have you no Christian name?"

The prisoner seemed to reflect for a moment, and then answered, sulkily: "I may as well tell you that you need not tire yourself by questioning me. I shan't answer any one else but the magistrate. You would like to make me cut my own throat, wouldn't you? A very clever trick, of course, but one that won't do for me."

"You must see that you only aggravate your situation," observed the governor.

"Not in the least. I am innocent; you wish to ruin me. I only defend myself. Get anything more out of me now, if you can. But you had better give me back what they took from me at the station-house. My hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous. I shall need them when I get out of this place. I want you to make a note of them on the register. Where are they?"

The money had been given to Lecoq by the keeper of the station-house, who had found it upon the prisoner when he was placed in his custody. Lecoq now laid it upon the table.

"Here are your hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous," said he, "and also your knife, your handkerchief, and four cigars."

An expression of lively contentment was discernible on the prisoner's features.

"Now," resumed the clerk, "will you answer?"

But the governor perceived the futility of further questioning; and silencing the clerk by a gesture, he told the prisoner to take off his boots.

Lecoq thought the assassin's glance wavered as he heard this order. Was it only a fancy?"

"Why must I do that?" asked the culprit.

"To pass under the beam," replied the clerk. "We must make a note of your exact height."

The prisoner made no reply, but sat down and drew off his heavy boots. The heel of the right one was worn down on the inside. It was, moreover, noticed that the prisoner wore no socks, and that his feet were coated with mud.

"You only wear boots on Sundays, then?" remarked Lecoq.

"Why do you think that?"

"By the mud with which your feet are covered, as high as the ankle-bone."

"What of that?" exclaimed the prisoner, in an insolent tone. "Is it a crime not to have a marchioness's feet?"

"It is a crime you are not guilty of, at all events," said the young detective slowly. "Do you think I can't see that if the mud were picked off your feet would be white and neat? The nails have been carefully cut and polished—"

He paused. A new idea inspired by his genius for investigation had just crossed Lecoq's mind. Pushing a chair in front of the prisoner, and spreading a newspaper over it, he said: "Will you place your foot there?"

The man did not comply with the request.

"It is useless to resist," exclaimed the governor, "we are in force."

The prisoner delayed no longer. He placed his foot on the chair, as he had been ordered, and Lecoq, with the aid of a knife, proceeded to remove the fragments of mud that adhered to the skin.

Anywhere else so strange and grotesque a proceeding would have excited laughter, but here, in this gloomy chamber, the anteroom of the assize court, an otherwise trivial act is fraught

with serious import. Nothing astonishes; and should a smile threaten to curve one's lips, it is instantly repressed

All the spectators, from the governor of the prison to the keepers, had witnessed many other incidents equally absurd; and no one thought of inquiring the detective's motive. This much was known already; that the prisoner was trying to conceal his identity. Now it was necessary to establish it, at any cost, and Lecoq had probably discovered some means of attaining this end.

The operation was soon concluded; and Lecoq swept the dust off the paper into the palm of his hand. He divided it into two parts, enclosing one portion in a scrap of paper, and slipping it into his own pocket. With the remainder he formed a package which he handed to the governor, saying: "I beg you, sir, to take charge of this, and to seal it up here, in presence of the prisoner. This formality is necessary, so that by and by he may not pretend that the dust has been changed."

The governor complied with the request, and as he placed this "bit of proof" (as he styled it) in a small satchel for safe keeping, the prisoner shrugged his shoulders with a sneering laugh. Still, beneath this cynical gaiety Lecoq thought he could detect poignant anxiety. Chance owed him the compensation of this slight triumph; for previous events had deceived all his calculations.

The prisoner did not offer the slightest objection when he was ordered to undress, and to exchange his soiled and blood-stained garments for the clothing furnished by the Government. Not a muscle of his face moved while he submitted his person to one of those ignominous examinations which make the blood rush to the forehead of the lowest criminal. It was with perfect indifference that he allowed an inspector to comb his hair and beard, and to examine the inside of his mouth, so as to make sure that he had not concealed either some fragment of glass, by the aid of which captives can sever the strongest bars, or one of those microscopical bits of lead with which prisoners write the notes they exchange, rolled up in a morsel of bread, and called "postilions."

These formalities having been concluded, the superintendent rang for one of the keepers. "Conduct this man to No. 3 of the secret cells," he ordered.

There was no need to drag the prisoner away. He walked

out, as he had entered, preceding the guard, like some old habitué, who knows where he is going.

"What a rascal!" exclaimed the clerk.

"Then you think—" began Lecoq, baffled but not convinced,

"Ah! there can be no doubt of it," declared the governor. "This man is certainly a dangerous criminal—an old offender —I think I have seen him before—I could almost swear to it."

Thus it was evident these people, with their long, varied experience, shared Gevrol's opinion; Lecoq stood alone. He did not discuss the matter—what good would it have done? Besides, the Widow Chupin was just being brought in.

The journey must have calmed her nerves, for she had become as gentle as a lamb. It was in a wheedling voice, and with tearful eyes, that she called upon these "good gentlemen" to witness the shameful injustice with which she was treated—she, an honest woman. Was she not the mainstay of her family (since her son Polyte was in custody, charged with pocket-picking), hence what would become of her daughter-in-law, and of her grandson Toto, who had no one to look after them but her?

Still, when her name had been taken, and a keeper was ordered to remove her, nature reasserted itself, and scarcely had she entered the corridor than she was heard quarreling with the guard.

"You are wrong not to be polite," she said; "you are losing a good fee, without counting many a good drink I would stand you when I get out of here."

Lecoq was now free until M. d'Escorval's arrival. He wandered through the gloomy corridors, from office to office, but finding himself assailed with questions by every one he came across, he eventually left the *depot,* and went and sat down on one of the benches beside the quay. Here he tried to collect his thoughts. His convictions were unchanged. He was more than ever convinced that the prisoner was concealing his real social standing, but, on the other hand, it was evident that he was well acquainted with the prison and its usages.

He had also proved himself to be endowed with far more cleverness than Lecoq had supposed. What self-control! What powers of dissimulation he had displayed! He had not so much as frowned while undergoing the severest ordeals, and he had managed to deceive the most experienced eyes in Paris.

The young detective had waited during nearly three hours,

as motionless as the bench on which he was seated, and so absorbed in studying his case that he had thought neither of the cold nor of the flight of time, when a carriage drew up before the entrance of the prison, and M. d'Escorval alighted, followed by his clerk.

Lecoq rose and hastened, well-nigh breathless with anxiety, toward the magistrate.

"My researches on the spot," said this functionary, "confirm me in the belief that you are right. Is there anything fresh?"

"Yes, sir; a fact that is apparently very trivial, though, in truth, it is of importance that—"

"Very well!" interrupted the magistrate. "You will explain it to me by and by. First of all, I must summarily examine the prisoners. A mere matter of form for to-day. Wait for me here."

Although the magistrate promised to make haste, Lecoq expected that at least an hour would elapse before he reappeared. In this he was mistaken. Twenty minutes later, M. d'Escorval emerged from the prison without his clerk.

He was walking very fast, and instead of approaching the young detective, he called to him at some little distance. "I must return home at once," he said, "instantly; I can not listen to you."

"But, sir—"

"Enough! the bodies of the victims have been taken to the Morgue. Keep a sharp lookout there. Then, this evening make —well—do whatever you think best."

"But, sir, I must—"

"To-morrow!—to-morrow, at nine o'clock, in my office in the Palais de Justice."

Lecoq wished to insist upon a hearing, but M. d'Escorval had entered, or rather thrown himself into, his carriage, and the coachman was already whipping up the horse.

"And to think that he's an investigating magistrate," panted Lecoq, left spellbound on the quay. "Has he gone mad?" As he spoke, an uncharitable thought took possession of his mind. "Can it be," he murmured, "that M. d'Escorval holds the key to the mystery? Perhaps he wishes to get rid of me."

This suspicion was so terrible that Lecoq hastened back to the prison, hoping that the prisoner's bearing might help to solve his doubts. On peering through the grated aperture in the door of the cell, he perceived the prisoner lying on the pallet that stood opposite the door. His face was turned toward the wall, and he was enveloped in the coverlid up to

his eyes. He was not asleep, for Lecoq could detect a strange movement of the body, which puzzled and annoyed him. On applying his ear instead of his eye to the aperture, he distinguished a stifled moan. There could no longer be any doubt. The death rattle was sounding in the prisoner's throat.

"Help! help!" cried Lecoq, greatly excited. "The prisoner is killing himself!"

A dozen keepers hastened to the spot. The door was quickly opened, and it was then ascertained that the prisoner, having torn a strip of binding from his clothes, had fastened it round his neck and tried to strangle himself with the assistance of a spoon that had been left him with his food. He was already unconscious, and the prison doctor, who immediately bled him, declared that had another ten minutes elapsed, help would have arrived too late.

When the prisoner regained his senses, he gazed around him with a wild, puzzled stare. One might have supposed that he was amazed to find himself still alive. Suddenly a couple of big tears welled from his swollen eyelids, and rolled down his cheeks. He was pressed with questions, but did not vouchsafe so much as a single word in response. As he was in such a desperate frame of mind, and as the orders to keep him in solitary confinement prevented the governor giving him a companion, it was decided to put a straight waistcoat on him. Lecoq assisted at this operation, and then walked away, puzzled, thoughtful, and agitated. Intuition told him that these mysterious occurrences concealed some terrible drama.

"Still, what can have occurred since the prisoner's arrival here?" he murmured. "Has he confessed his guilt to the magistrate, or what is his reason for attempting so desperate an act?"

VIII

LECOQ did not sleep that night, although he had been on his feet for more than forty hours, and had scarcely paused either to eat or drink. Anxiety, hope, and even fatigue itself, had imparted to his body the fictitious strength of fever, and

to his intellect the unhealthy acuteness which is so often the result of intense mental effort.

He no longer had to occupy himself with imaginary deductions, as in former times when in the employ of his patron, the astronomer. Once again did the fact prove stranger than fiction. Here was reality—a terrible reality personified by the corpses of three victims lying on the marble slabs at the Morgue. Still, if the catastrophe itself was a patent fact, its motive, its surroundings, could only be conjectured. Who could tell what circumstances had preceded and paved the way for this tragical dénouement?

It is true that all doubt might be dispelled by one discovery —the identity of the murderer. Who was he? Who was right, Gevrol or Lecoq? The former's views were shared by the officials at the prison; the latter stood alone. Again, the former's opinion was based upon formidable proof, the evidence of sight; while Lecoq's hypothesis rested only on a series of subtle observations and deductions, starting from a single sentence that had fallen from the prisoner's lips.

And yet Lecoq resolutely persisted in his theory, guided by the following reasons. He learnt from M. d'Escorval's clerk that when the magistrate had examined the prisoner, the latter not only refused to confess, but answered all the questions put to him in the most evasive fashion. In several instances, moreover, he had not replied at all. If the magistrate had not insisted, it was because this first examination was a mere formality, solely intended to justify the somewhat premature delivery of the order to imprison the accused.

Now, under these circumstances, how was one to explain the prisoner's attempt at self-destruction? Prison statistics show that habitual offenders do not commit suicide. When apprehended for a criminal act, they are sometimes seized with a wild frenzy and suffer repeated nervous attacks; at others they fall into a dull stupor, just as some glutted beast succumbs to sleep with the blood of his prey still dripping from his lips. However, such men never think of putting an end to their days. They hold fast to life, no matter how seriously they may be compromised. In truth, they are cowards.

On the other hand, the unfortunate fellow who, in a moment of frenzy, commits a crime, not unfrequently seeks to avoid the consequences of his act by self-destruction.

Hence, the prisoner's frustrated attempt at suicide was a

strong argument in favor of Lecoq's theory. This wretched man's secret must be a terrible one since he held it dearer than life, since he had tried to destroy himself that he might take it unrevealed to the grave.

Four o'clock was striking when Lecoq sprang from his bed on which he had thrown himself without undressing; and five minutes later he was walking down the Rue Montmartre. The weather was still cold and muggy; and a thick fog hung over the city. But the young detective was too engrossed with his own thoughts to pay attention to any atmospherical unpleasantness. Walking with a brisk stride, he had just reached the church of Saint Eustache, when a coarse, mocking voice accosted him with the exclamation: "Ah, ha! my fine fellow!"

He looked up and perceived Gevrol, who, with three of his men, had come to cast his nets round about the markets, whence the police generally return with a good haul of thieves and vagabonds.

"You are up very early this morning, Monsieur Lecoq," continued the inspector; "you are still trying to discover our man's identity, I suppose?"

"Still trying."

"Is he a prince in disguise, or only a marquis?"

"One or the other, I am quite certain."

"All right then. In that case you will not refuse us the opportunity to drink to your success."

Lecoq consented, and the party entered a wine-shop close by. When the glasses were filled, Lecoq turned to Gevrol and exclaimed: "Upon my word, General, our meeting will save me a long walk. I was going to the prefecture to request you, on M. d'Escorval's behalf, to send one of our comrades to the Morgue this morning. The affair at the Poivriere has been noised about, and all the world will be there, so he desires some officer to be present to watch the crowd and listen to the remarks of the visitors."

"All right; Father Absinthe shall be there when the doors open."

To send Father Absinthe where a shrewd and subtle agent was required was a mockery. Still Lecoq did not protest, for it was better to be badly served than to be betrayed; and he could at least trust Father Absinthe.

"It doesn't much matter," continued Gevrol; "but you should have informed me of this last evening. However, when I reached the prefecture you had gone."

"I had some work to do."

"Yes?"

"At the station-house near the Barriere d'Italie. I wanted to know whether the floor of the cell was paved or tiled." So saying, Lecoq paid the score, saluted his superior officer, and went out."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gevrol, striking his glass violently upon the counter. "Thunder! how that fellow provokes me! He does not know the A B C of his profession. When he can't discover anything, he invents wonderful stories, and then misleads the magistrates with his high-sounding phrases, in the hope of gaining promotion. I'll give him advancement with a vengeance! I'll teach him to set himself above me!"

Lecoq had not been deceived. The evening before, he had visited the station-house where the prisoner had first been confined, and had compared the soil of the cell floor with the dust he had placed in his pocket; and he carried away with him, as he believed, one of those crushing proofs that often suffice to extort from the most obstinate criminal a complete confession.

If Lecoq was in haste to part company with Gevrol, it was because he was anxious to pursue his investigations still further, before appearing in M. d'Escorval's presence. He was determined to find the cab-driver who had been stopped by the two women in the Rue du Chevaleret; and with this object in view, he had obtained at the prefecture the names and addresses of all the cab-owners hiring between the road to Fontainebleau and the Seine.

His earlier efforts at investigation proved unsuccessful. At the first establishment he visited, the stable boys, who were not yet up, swore at him roundly. In the second, he found the grooms at work, but none of the drivers had as yet put in an appearance. Moreover, the owner refused to show him the books upon which are recorded—or should be recorded—each driver's daily engagements. Lecoq was beginning to despair, when at about half-past seven o'clock he reached an establishment just beyond the fortifications belonging to a man named Trigault. Here he learned that on Sunday night, or rather, early on Monday morning, one of the drivers had been accosted on his way home by some persons who succeeded in persuading him to drive them back into Paris.

This driver, who was then in the courtyard harnessing his horse, proved to be a little old man, with a ruddy complexion,

and a pair of small eyes full of cunning. Lecoq walked up to him at once.

"Was it you," he asked, "who, on Sunday night or rather on Monday, between one and two in the morning, drove a couple of women from the Rue du Chevaleret into Paris?"

The driver looked up, and surveying Lecoq attentively, cautiously replied: "Perhaps."

"It is a positive answer that I want."

"Aha!" said the old man sneeringly, "you know two ladies who have lost something in a cab, and so—"

The young detective trembled with satisfaction. This man was certainly the one he was looking for. "Have you heard anything about a crime that has been committed in the neighborhood?" he interrupted.

"Yes; a murder in a low wine-shop."

"Well, then, I will tell you that these two women are mixed up in it; they fled when we entered the place. I am trying to find them. I am a detective; here is my card. Now, can you give me any information?"

The driver had grown very pale. "Ah! the wretches!" he exclaimed. "I am no longer surprised at the luck-money they gave me—a louis and two five-franc pieces for the fare—thirty francs in all. Cursed money! If I hadn't spent it, I'd throw it away!"

"And where did you drive them?"

"To the Rue de Bourgogne. I have forgotten the number, but I should recognize the house."

"Unfortunately, they would not have let you drive them to their own door."

"Who knows? I saw them ring the bell, and I think they went in just as I drove away. Shall I take you there?"

Lecoq's sole response was to spring on to the box, exclaiming: "Let us be off."

It was not to be supposed that the women who had escaped from the Widow Chupin's drinking-den at the moment of the murder were utterly devoid of intelligence. Nor was it at all likely that these two fugitives, conscious as they were of their perilous situation, had gone straight to their real home in a vehicle hired on the public highway. Hence, the driver's hope of finding them in the Rue de Bourgogne was purely chimerical. Lecoq was fully aware of this, and yet he did not hesitate to jump on to the box and give the signal for starting. In so

doing, he obeyed a maxim which he had framed in his early days of meditation—a maxim intended to assure his after-fame, and which ran as follows: "Always suspect that which seems probable; and begin by believing what appears incredible."

As soon as the vehicle was well under way, the young detective proceeded to ingratiate himself into the driver's good graces, being anxious to obtain all the information that this worthy was able to impart.

In a tone that implied that all trifling would be useless the cabman cried: "Hey up, hey up, Cocotte!" and his mare pricked up her ears and quickened her pace, so that the Route de Choisy was speedily reached. Then it was that Lecoq resumed his inquiries.

"Well, my good fellow," he began, "you have told me the principal facts, now I should like the details. How did these two women attract your attention?"

"Oh, it was very simple. I had been having a most unfortunate day—six hours on a stand on the Boulevards, with the rain pouring all the time. It was simply awful. At midnight I had not made more than a franc and a half for myself, but I was so wet and miserable and the horse seemed so done up that I decided to go home. I *did* grumble, I can tell you. Well, I had just passed the corner of the Rue Picard, in the Rue du Chevaleret, when I saw two women standing under a lamp, some little distance off. I did not pay any attention to them; for when a man is as old as I am, women—"

"Go on!" said Lecoq, who could not restrain his impatience.

"I had already passed them, when they began to call after me. I pretended I did not hear them; but one of them ran after the cab, crying: 'A louis! a louis for yourself!' I hesitated for a moment, when the woman added: 'And ten francs for the fare!' I then drew up."

Lecoq was boiling over with impatience; but he felt that the wisest course was not to interrupt the driver with questions, but to listen to all he had to say.

"As you may suppose," continued the coachman, "I wasn't inclined to trust two such suspicious characters, alone at that hour and in that part of the city. So, just as they were about to get into the cab, I called to them: 'Wait a bit, my little friends, you have promised papa some sous; where are they?" The one who had called after the cab at once handed me thirty francs, saying: 'Above all, make haste!'"

"Your recital could not be more minute," exclaimed Lecoq, approvingly. "Now, how about these two women?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind of women did they seem to be; what did you take them for?"

"Oh, for nothing very good!" replied the driver, with a knowing smile.

"Ah! and how were they dressed?"

"Like most of the girls who go to dance at the Rainbow. One of them, however, was very neat and prim, while the other —well! she was a terrible dowdy."

"Which ran after you?"

"The girl who was neatly dressed, the one who—" The driver suddenly paused: some vivid remembrance passed through his brain, and, abruptly jerking the rains, he brought his horse to a standstill.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed. "Now I think of it, I did notice something strange. One of the two women called the other 'Madame' as large as life, while the other said 'thee' and 'thou,' and spoke as if she were somebody."

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the young detective, in three different keys. "And which was it that said 'thee' and 'thou'?"

"Why, the dowdy one. She with shabby dress and shoes as big as a gouty man's. You should have seen her shake the prim-looking girl, as if she had been a plum tree. 'You little fool!' said she, 'do you want to ruin us? You will have time to faint when we get home; now come along. And then she began to sob: 'Indeed, madame, indeed I can't!' she said, and really she seemed quite unable to move: in fact, she appeared to be so ill that I said to myself: 'Here is a young woman who has drunk more than is good for her!'"

These facts confirmed even if they corrected Lecoq's first suppositions. As he had suspected, the social position of the two women was not the same. He had been mistaken, however, in attributing the higher standing to the woman wearing the shoes with the high heels, the marks of which he had so particularly noticed in the snow, with all the attendant signs of precipitation, terror, and weakness. In reality, social preeminence belonged to the woman who had left the large, broad footprints behind her. And not merely was she of a superior rank, but she had also shown superior energy. Contrary to

Lecoq's original idea, it now seemed evident that she was the mistress, and her companion the servant.

"Is that all, my good fellow?" he asked the driver, who during the last few minutes had been busy with his horses.

"Yes," replied the cabman, "except that I noticed that the shabbily dressed woman who paid me had a hand as small as a child's, and in spite of her anger, her voice was as sweet as music."

"Did you see her face?"

"I just caught a glimpse of it."

"Could you tell if she were pretty, or whether she was a blonde or brunette?"

So many questions at a time confused the driver. "Stop a minute!" he replied. "In my opinion she wasn't pretty, and I don't believe she was young, but she certainly was a blonde, and with plenty of hair too."

"Was she tall or short, stout or slender?"

"Between the two."

This was very vague. "And the other," asked Lecoq, "the neatly dressed one?"

"The deuce! As for her, I did not notice her at all; all I know about her is that she was very small."

"Would you recognize her if you met her again?"

"Good heavens! no."

The vehicle was now rolling along the Rue de Bourgogne. Half-way down the street the driver pulled up, and, turning to Lecoq, exclaimed: "Here we are. That's the house the hussies went into."

To draw off the silk handkerchief that served him as a muffler, to fold it and slip it into his pocket, to spring to the ground and enter the house indicated, was only the work of an instant for the young detective.

In the concierge's little room he found an old woman knitting. Lecoq bowed to her politely, and, displaying the silk handkerchief, exclaimed: "Madame, I have come to return this article to one of your lodgers."

"To which one?"

"Really, I don't exactly know."

In a moment the worthy dame imagined that this polite young man was making fun of her. "You scamp—!" she began.

"Excuse me," interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to finish. I must tell you that at about three o'clock in the morning, of the

day before yesterday, I was quietly returning home, when two ladies, who were seemingly in a great hurry, overtook me and passed on. One of them dropped this handkerchief, which I picked up. I hastened after her to restore it, but before I could overtake them they had rung the bell at your door and were already in the house. I did not like to ring at such an unearthly hour for fear of disturbing you. Yesterday I was so busy I couldn't come; however, here I am at last, and here's the handkerchief." So saying, Lecoq laid the handkerchief on the table, and turned as if to go, when the concierge detained him.

"Many thanks for your kindness," said she, "but you can keep it. We have no ladies in this house who are in the habit of coming home alone after midnight."

"Still I have eyes," insisted Lecoq, "and I certainly saw—"

"Ah! I had forgotten," exclaimed the old woman. "The night you speak of some one certainly did ring the bell here. I pulled the string that opens the door and listened, but not hearing any one close the door or come upstairs, I said to myself: 'Some mischievous fellow has been playing a trick on me.' I slipped on my dress and went out into the hall, where I saw two women hastening toward the door. Before I could reach them they slammed the door in my face. I opened it again as quickly as I could and looked out into the street. But they were hurrying away as fast as they could."

"In what direction?"

"Oh! they were running toward the Rue de Varennes."

Lecoq was baffled again; however, he bowed civilly to the concierge, whom he might possibly have need of at another time, and then went back to the cab. "As I had supposed, they do not live here," he remarked to the driver.

The latter shrugged his shoulders in evident vexation, which would inevitably have vent in a torrent of words, if Lecoq, who had consulted his watch, had not forestalled the outburst by saying: "Nine o'clock—I am an hour behind time already: still I shall have some news to tell. Now take me to the Morgue as quickly as possible."

When a mysterious crime has been perpetrated, or a great catastrophe has happened, and the identity of the victims has not been established, "a great day" invariably follows at the Morgue. The attendants are so accustomed to the horrors of the place that the most sickly sight fails to impress them; and

even under the most distressing circumstances, they hasten gaily to and fro, exchanging jests well calculated to make an ordinary mortal's flesh creep. As a rule, they are far less interested in the corpses laid out for public view on the marble slabs in the principal hall than in the people of every age and station in life who congregate here all day long; at times coming in search of some lost relative or friend, but far more frequently impelled by idle curiosity.

As the vehicle conveying Lecoq reached the quay, the young detective perceived that a large, excited crowd was gathered outside the building. The newspapers had reported the tragedy at the Widow Chupin's drinking-den, of course, more or less correctly, and everybody wished to see the victims.

On drawing near the Pont Notre Dame, Lecoq told the driver to pull up. "I prefer to alight here, rather than in front of the Morgue," he said, springing to the ground. Then, producing first his watch, and next his purse, he added: "We have been an hour and forty minutes, my good fellow, consequently I owe you—"

"Nothing at all," replied the driver, decidedly.

"But—"

"No—not a sou. I am too worried already to think that I took the money these hussies offered me. It would only have served me right if the liquor I bought with it had given me the gripes. Don't be uneasy about the score, and if you need a trap use mine for nothing, till you have caught the jades."

As Lecoq's purse was low, he did not insist.

"You will, at least, take my name and address?" continued the driver.

"Certainly. The magistrate will want your evidence, and a summons will be sent you."

"All right, then. Address it to Papillon (Eugene), driver, care of M. Trigault. I lodge at his place, because I have some small interest in the business, you see."

The young detective was hastening away, when Papillon called him back. "When you leave the Morgue you will want to go somewhere else," he said, "you told me that you had another appointment, and that you were already late."

"Yes, I ought to be at the Palais de Justice; but it is only a few steps from here."

"No matter. I will wait for you at the corner of the bridge. It's useless to say 'no'; I've made up my mind, and I'm a

Breton, you know. I want you to ride out the thirty francs that those jades paid me."

It would have been cruel to refuse such a request. Accordingly, Lecoq made a gesture of assent, and then hurried toward the Morgue.

If there was a crowd on the roadway outside, it was because the gloomy building itself was crammed full of people. Indeed, the sightseers, most of whom could see nothing at all, were packed as closely as sardines, and it was only by dint of well-nigh superhuman efforts that Lecoq managed to effect an entrance. As usual, he found among the mob a large number of girls and women; for, strange to say, the Parisian fair sex is rather partial to the disgusting sights and horrible emotions that repay a visit to the Morgue.

The shop and work girls who reside in the neighborhood readily go out of their way to catch a glimpse of the corpses which crime, accident, and suicide bring to this horrible place. A few, the more sensitive among them, may come no further than the door, but the others enter, and after a long stare return and recount their impressions to their less courageous companions.

If there should be no corpse exhibited; if all the marble slabs are unoccupied, strange as it may seem, the visitors turn hastily away with an expression of disappointment or discontent. There was no fear of their doing so, however, on the morrow of the tragedy at Poivriere, for the mysterious murderer whose identity Lecoq was trying to establish had furnished three victims for their delectation. Panting with curiosity, they paid but little attention to the unhealthy atmosphere: and yet a damp chill came from beyond the iron railings, while from the crowd itself rose an infectious vapor, impregnated with the stench of the chloride of lime used as a disinfectant.

As a continuous accompaniment to the exclamations, sighs, and whispered comments of the bystanders came the murmur of the water trickling from a spigot at the head of each slab; a tiny stream that flowed forth only to fall in fine spray upon the marble. Through the small arched windows a gray light stole in on the exposed bodies, bringing each muscle into bold relief, revealing the ghastly tints of the lifeless flesh, and imparting a sinister aspect to the tattered clothing hung around the room to aid in the identification of the corpses. This clothing, after a certain time, is sold—for nothing is wasted at the Morgue.

However, Lecoq was too occupied with his own thoughts to remark the horrors of the scene. He scarcely bestowed a glance on the three victims. He was looking for Father Absinthe, whom he could not perceive. Had Gevrol intentionally or unintentionally failed to fulfil his promise, or had Father Absinthe forgotten his duty in his morning dram?

Unable to explain the cause of his comrade's absence, Lecoq addressed himself to the head keeper: "It would seem that no one has recognized the victims," he remarked.

"No one. And yet, ever since opening, we have had an immense crowd. If I were master here, on days like this, I would charge an admission fee of two sous a head, with half-price for children. It would bring in a round sum, more than enough to cover the expenses."

The keeper's reply seemed to offer an inducement to conversation, but Lecoq did not seize it. "Excuse me," he interrupted, "didn't a detective come here this morning?"

"Yes, there was one here."

"Has he gone away then? I don't see him anywhere?"

The keeper glanced suspiciously at his eager questioner, but after a moment's hesitation, he ventured to inquire: "Are you one of them?"

"Yes, I am," replied Lecoq, exhibiting his card in support of his assertion.

"And your name?"

"Is Lecoq."

The keeper's face brightened up. "In that case," said he, "I have a letter for you, written by your comrade, who was obliged to go away. Here it is."

The young detective at once tore open the envelope and read: "Monsieur Lecoq—"

"Monsieur?" This simple formula of politeness brought a faint smile to his lips. Was it not, on Father Absinthe's part, an evident recognition of his colleague's superiority. Indeed, our hero accepted it as a token of unquestioning devotion which it would be his duty to repay with a master's kind protection toward his first disciple. However, he had no time to waste in thought, and accordingly at once proceeded to peruse the note, which ran as follows:

"Monsieur Lecoq—I had been standing on duty since the opening of the Morgue, when at about nine o'clock three young

men entered, arm-in-arm. From their manner and appearance, I judged them to be clerks in some store or warehouse. Suddenly I noticed that one of them turned as white as his shirt; and calling the attention of his companions to one of the unknown victims, he whispered: 'Gustave!'

"His comrades put their hands over his mouth, and one of them exclaimed: 'What are you about, you fool, to mix yourself up with this affair! Do you want to get us into trouble?'

"Thereupon they went out, and I followed them. But the person who had first spoken was so overcome that he could scarcely drag himself along; and his companions were obliged to take him to a little restaurant close by. I entered it myself, and it is there I write this letter, in the mean time watching them out of the corner of my eye. I send this note, explaining my absence, to the head keeper, who will give it you. You will understand that I am going to follow these men. A. B. S."

The handwriting of this letter was almost illegible; and there were mistakes in spelling in well-nigh every line; still, its meaning was clear and exact, and could not fail to excite the most flattering hopes.

Lecoq's face was so radiant when he returned to the cab that, as the old coachman urged on his horse, he could not refrain from saying: "Things are going on to suit you."

A friendly "hush!" was the only response. It required all Lecoq's attention to classify this new information. When he alighted from the cab in front of the Palais de Justice, he experienced considerable difficulty in dismissing the old cabman, who insisted upon remaining at his orders. He succeeded at last, however, but even when he had reached the portico on the left side of the building, the worthy fellow, standing up, still shouted at the top of his voice: "At M. Trigault's house—don't forget—Father Papillon—No. 998—1,000 less 2—"

Lecoq had entered the left wing of the Palais. He climbed the stairs till he had reached the third floor, and was about to enter the long, narrow, badly-lighted corridor known as the Galerie de l'Instruction, when, finding a doorkeeper installed behind a heavy oaken desk, he remarked: "M. d'Escorval is, of course, in his office?"

The man shook his head. "No," said he, "M. d'Escorval is not here this morning, and he won't be here for several weeks."

"Why not! What do you mean?"

"Last night, as he was alighting from his carriage, at his own door, he had a most unfortunate fall, and broke his leg."

IX

SOME men are wealthy. They own a carriage drawn by a pair of high-stepping horses, and driven by a coachman in stylish livery; and as they pass by, leaning back on comfortable cushions, they become the object of many an envious glance. Sometimes, however, the coachman has taken a drop too much, and upsets the carriage; perhaps the horses run away and a general smash ensues; or, maybe, the hitherto fortunate owner, in a moment of absent-mindedness, misses the step, and fractures his leg on the curbstone. Such accidents occur every day; and their long list should make humble foot-passengers bless the lowly lot which preserves them from such peril.

On learning the misfortune that had befallen M. d'Escorval, Lecoq's face wore such an expression of consternation that the doorkeeper could not help laughing. "What is there so very extraordinary about that I've told you?" he asked.

"I—oh! nothing—"

The detective did not speak the truth. The fact is, he had just been struck by the strange coincidence of two events—the supposed murderer's attempted suicide, and the magistrate's fall. Still, he did not allow the vague presentiment that flitted through his mind to assume any definite form. For after all, what possible connection could there be between the two occurrences? Then again, he never allowed himself to be governed by prejudice, nor had he as yet enriched his formulary with an axiom he afterward professed: "Distrust all circumstances that seem to favor your secret wishes."

Of course, Lecoq did not rejoice at M. d'Escorval's accident; could he have prevented it, he would have gladly done so. Still, he could not help saying to himself that this stroke of misfortune would free him from all further connection with a man whose superciliousness and disdain had been painfully disagreeable to his feelings.

This thought caused a sensation of relief—almost one of light-heartedness. "In that case," said the young detective to the doorkeeper, "I shall have nothing to do here this morning."

"You must be joking," was the reply. "Does the world stop moving because one man is disabled? The news only arrived an hour ago; but all the urgent business that M. d'Escorval had in charge has already been divided among the other magistrates."

"I came here about that terrible affair that occurred the other night just beyond the Barrière de Fontainebleau."

"Eh! Why didn't you say so at once? A messenger has been sent to the prefecture after you already. M. Segmuller has charge of the case, and he's waiting for you."

Doubt and perplexity were plainly written on Lecoq's forehead. He was trying to remember the magistrate that bore this name, and wondered whether he was a likely man to espouse his views.

"Yes," resumed the doorkeeper, who seemed to be in a talkative mood, "M. Segmuller—you don't seem to know him. He is a worthy man, not quite so grim as most of our gentlemen. A prisoner he had examined said one day: 'That devil there has pumped me so well that I shall certainly have my head chopped off; but, nevertheless, he's a good fellow!"

His heart somewhat lightened by these favorable reports, Lecoq went and tapped at a door that was indicated to him, and which bore the number—22.

"Come in!" called out a pleasant voice.

The young detective entered, and found himself face to face with a man of some forty years of age, tall and rather corpulent, who at once exclaimed: "Ah! you are Lecoq. Very well—take a seat. I am busy just now looking over the papers of the case, but I will attend to you in five minutes."

Lecoq obeyed, at the same time glancing furtively at the magistrate with whom he was about to work. M. Segmuller's appearance corresponded perfectly with the description given by the doorkeeper. His plump face wore an air of frankness and benevolence, and his blue eyes had a most pleasant expression. Nevertheless, Lecoq distrusted these appearances, and in so doing he was right.

Born near Strasbourg, M. Segmuller possessed that candid physiognomy common to most of the natives of blonde Alsace—a deceitful mask, which, behind seeming simplicity, not un-

frequently conceals a Gascon cunning, rendered all the more dangerous since it is allied with extreme caution. He had a wonderfully alert, penetrating mind; but his system—every magistrate has his own—was mainly good-humor. Unlike most of his colleagues, who were as stiff and cutting in manner as the sword which the statue of Justice usually holds in her hand, he made simplicity and kindness of demeanor his leading trait, though, of course, without ever losing sight of his magisterial duties.

Still, the tone of his voice was so paternal, and the subtle purport of his questions so veiled by his seeming frankness, that most of those whom he examined forgot the necessity of protecting themselves, and unawares confessed their guilt. Thus, it frequently happened that while some unsuspecting culprit was complacently congratulating himself upon getting the best of the judge, the poor wretch was really being turned inside out like a glove.

By the side of such a man as M. Segmuller a grave and slender clerk would have excited distrust; so he had chosen one who was a caricature of himself. This clerk's name was Goguet. He was short but corpulent, and his broad, beardless face habitually wore a silly smile, not out of keeping with his intellect, which was none of the brightest.

As stated above, when Lecoq entered M. Segmuller's room the latter was busy studying the case which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands. All the articles which the young detective had collected, from the flakes of wool to the diamond earring, were spread out upon the magistrate's desk. With the greatest attention, he perused the report prepared by Lecoq, and according to the different phases of the affair, he examined one or another of the objects before him, or else consulted the plan of the ground.

"A good half-hour elapsed before he had completed his inspection, when he threw himself back in his armchair. Monsieur Lecoq," he said, slowly, "Monsieur d'Escorval has informed me by a note on the margin of this file of papers that you are an intelligent man, and that we can trust you."

"I am willing, at all events."

"You speak too slightingly of yourself; this is the first time that an agent has brought me a report as complete as yours. You are young, and if you persevere, I think you will be able to accomplish great things in your profession."

Nervous with delight, Lecoq bowed and stammered his thanks.

"Your opinion in this matter coincides with mine," continued M. Segmuller, "and the public prosecutor informs me that M. d'Escorval shares the same views. An enigma is before us; and it ought to be solved."

"Oh!—we'll solve it, I am certain, sir," exclaimed Lecoq, who at this moment felt capable of the most extraordinary achievements. Indeed, he would have gone through fire and water for the magistrate who had received him so kindly, and his enthusiasm sparkled so plainly in his eyes that M. Segmuller could not restrain a smile.

"I have strong hopes of it myself," he responded; "but we are far from the end. Now, what have you been doing since yesterday? Did M. d'Escorval give you any orders? Have you obtained any fresh information?"

"I don't think I have wasted my time," replied Lecoq, who at once proceeded to relate the various facts that had come to his knowledge since his departure from the Poivriere.

With rare precision and that happiness of expression which seldom fails a man well acquainted with his subject, he recounted the daring feats of the presumed accomplice, the points he had noted in the supposed murderer's conduct, the latter's unsuccessful attempt at self-destruction. He repeated the testimony given by the cab-driver, and by the concierge in the Rue de Bourgogne, and then read the letter he had received from Father Absinthe.

In conclusion, he placed on the magistrate's desk some of the dirt he had scraped from the prisoner's feet; at the same time depositing beside it a similar parcel of dust collected on the floor of the cell in which the murderer was confined at the Barrière d'Italie.

When Lecoq had explained the reasons that had led him to collect this soil, and the conclusions that might be drawn from a comparison of the two parcels, M. Segmuller, who had been listening attentively, at once exclaimed: "You are right. It may be that you have discovered a means to confound all the prisoner's denials. At all events, this is certainly a proof of surprising sagacity on your part."

So it must have been, for Goguet, the clerk, nodded approvingly. "Capital!" he murmured. "I should never have thought of that."

While he was talking, M. Segmuller had carefully placed all the so-called "articles of conviction" in a large drawer, from which they would not emerge until the trial. "Now," said he, "I understand the case well enough to examine the Widow Chupin. We may gain some information from her."

He was laying his hand upon the bell, when Lecoq stopped him with an almost supplicating gesture. "I have one great favor to ask you, sir," he observed.

"What is it?—speak."

"I should very much like to be present at this examination. It takes so little, sometimes, to awaken a happy inspiration."

Although the law says that the accused shall first of all be privately examined by the investigating magistrate assisted by his clerk, it also allows the presence of police agents. Accordingly, M. Segmuller told Lecoq that he might remain. At the same time he rang his bell; which was speedily answered by a messenger.

"Has the Widow Chupin been brought here, in compliance with my orders?" asked M. Segmuller.

"Yes, sir; she is in the gallery outside."

"Let her come in then."

An instant later the hostess of the Poivriere entered the room, bowing to the right and to the left. This was not her first appearance before a magistrate, and she was not ignorant of the respect that is due to justice. Accordingly, she had arrayed herself for her examination with the utmost care. She had arranged her rebellious gray locks in smooth bandeaux, and her garments, although of common material, looked positively neat. She had even persuaded one of the prison warders to buy her—with the money she had about her at the time of her arrest—a black crape cap, and a couple of white pocket-handkerchiefs, intending to deluge the latter with her tears, should the situation call for a pathetic display.

She was indeed far too knowing to rely solely on the mere artifices of dress; hence, she had also drawn upon her *repertoire* of grimaces for an innocent, sad, and yet resigned expression, well fitted, in her opinion, to win the sympathy and indulgence of the magistrate upon whom her fate would depend.

Thus disguised, with downcast eyes and honeyed voice, she looked so unlike the terrible termagant of the Poivriere, that her customers would scarcely have recognized her. Indeed, an honest old bachelor might have offered her twenty francs a

month to take charge of his chambers—solely on the strength of her good looks. But M. Segmuller had unmasked so many hypocrites that he was not deceived for a moment. "What an old actress!" he muttered to himself, and, glancing at Lecoq, he perceived the same thought sparkling in the young detective's eyes. It is true that the magistrate's penetration may have been due to some notes he had just perused—notes containing an abstract of the woman's former life, and furnished by the chief of police at the magistrate's request.

With a gesture of authority M. Segmuller warned Goguet, the clerk with the silly smile, to get his writing materials ready. He then turned toward the Widow Chupin. "Your name?" he asked in a sharp tone.

"Aspasie Claperdty, my maiden name," replied the old woman, "and to-day, the Widow Chupin, at your service, sir;" so saying, she made a low courtesy, and then added: "A lawful widow, you understand, sir; I have my marriage papers safe in my chest at home; and if you wish to send any one—"

"Your age?" interrupted the magistrate.

"Fifty-four."

"Your profession?"

"Dealer in wines and spirits outside of Paris, near the Rue du Château-des-Rentiers, just beyond the fortifications."

A prisoner's examination always begins with these questions as to individuality, which gives both the magistrate and the culprit time to study each other, to try, as it were, each other's strength, before joining in a serious struggle; just as two duelists, about to engage in mortal combat, first try a few passes with the foils.

"Now," resumed M. Segmuller, "we will note your antecedents. Have you not already been found guilty of several offenses?"

The Widow Chupin was too well versed in criminal procedure to be ignorant of those famous records which render the denial of identity such a difficult matter in France. "I have been unfortunate, my good judge," she whined.

"Yes, several times. First of all, you were arrested on a charge of receiving stolen goods."

"But it was proved that I was innocent, that my character was whiter than snow. My poor, dear husband had been deceived by his comrades; that was all."

"Possibly. But while your husband was undergoing his sen-

tence, you were condemned, first to one month's and then to three months' imprisonment for stealing."

"Oh, I had some enemies who did their best to ruin me."

"Next you were imprisoned for having led some young girls astray."

"They were good-for-nothing hussies, my kind sir, heartless, unprincipled creatures. I did them many favors, and then they went and related a batch of falsehoods to ruin me. I have always been too kind and considerate toward others."

The list of the woman's offenses was not exhausted, but M. Segmuller thought it useless to continue. "Such is your past," he resumed. "At the present time your wine-shop is the resort of rogues and criminals. Your son is undergoing his fourth term of imprisonment; and it has been clearly proved that you abetted and assisted him in his evil deeds. Your daughter-in-law, by some miracle, has remained honest and industrious, hence you have tormented and abused her to such an extent that the authorities have been obliged to interfere. When she left your house you tried to keep her child—no doubt meaning to bring it up after the same fashion as its father."

"This," thought the Widow Chupin, "is the right moment to try and soften the magistrate's heart." Accordingly, she drew one of her new handkerchiefs from her pocket, and, by dint of rubbing her eyes, endeavored to extract a tear. "Oh, unhappy me," she groaned. "How can any one imagine that I would harm my grandson, my poor little Toto! Why, I should be worse than a wild beast to try and bring my own flesh and blood to perdition."

She soon perceived, however, that her lamentations did not much affect M. Segmuller, hence, suddenly changing both her tone and manner, she began her justification. She did not positively deny her past; but she threw all the blame on the injustice of destiny, which, while favoring a few, generally the less deserving, showed no mercy to others. Alas! she was one of those who had had no luck in life, having always been persecuted, despite her innocence. In this last affair, for instance, how was she to blame? A triple murder had stained her shop with blood; but the most respectable establishments are not exempt from similar catastrophes. During her solitary confinement, she had, said she, dived down into the deepest recesses of her conscience, and she was still unable to discover what blame could justly be laid at her door.

"I can tell you," interrupted the magistrate. "You are accused of impeding the action of the law."

"Good heavens! Is it possible?"

"And of seeking to defeat justice. This is equivalent to complicity, Widow Chupin; take care. When the police entered your cabin, after this crime had been committed, you refused to answer their questions."

"I told them all that I knew."

"Very well, then, you must repeat what you told them to me."

M. Segmuller had reason to feel satisfied. He had conducted the examination in such a way that the Widow Chupin would now have to initiate a narrative of the tragedy. This excellent point gained; for this shrewd old woman, possessed of all her coolness, would naturally have been on her guard against any direct questions. Now, it was essential that she should not suspect either what the magistrate knew of the affair, or what he was ignorant of. By leaving her to her own devices she might, in the course of the version which she proposed to substitute for the truth, not merely strengthen Lecoq's theories, but also let fall some remark calculated to facilitate the task of future investigation. Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were of opinion that the version of the crime which they were about to hear had been concocted at the station-house of the Place d'Italie while the murderer and the spurious drunkard were left together, and that it had been transmitted by the accomplice to the widow during the brief conversation they were allowed to have through the wicket of the latter's cell.

Invited by the magistrate to recount the circumstances of the tragedy, Mother Chupin did not hesitate for a moment. "Oh, it was a very simple affair, my good sir," she began. "I was sitting by my fireside on Sunday evening, when suddenly the door opened, and three men and two women came in."

M. Segmuller and the young detective exchanged glances. The accomplice had evidently seen Lecoq and his comrade examining the footprints, and accordingly the presence of the two women was not to be denied.

"What time was this?" asked the magistrate.

"About eleven o'clock."

"Go on."

"As soon as they sat down they ordered a bowl of wine, *à la Française*. Without boasting, I may say that I haven't an

equal in preparing that drink. Of course, I waited on them, and afterward, having a blouse to mend for my boy, I went upstairs to my room, which is just over the shop."

"Leaving the people alone?"

"Yes, my judge."

"That showed a great deal of confidence on your part."

The widow sadly shook her head. "People as poor as I am don't fear the thieves," she sighed.

"Go on—go on."

"Well, I had been upstairs about half an hour, when I heard some one below call out: 'Eh! old woman!' So I went down, and found a tall, big-bearded man, who had just come in. He asked for a glass of brandy, which I brought to a table where he had sat down by himself."

"And then did you go upstairs again?" interrupted the magistrate.

The exclamation was ironical, of course, but no one could have told from the Widow Chupin's placid countenance whether she was aware that such was the case.

"Precisely, my good sir," she replied in the most composed manner. "Only this time I had scarcely taken up my needle when I heard a terrible uproar in the shop. I hurried downstairs to put a stop to it—but heaven knows my interference would have been of little use. The three men who had come in first of all had fallen upon the newcomer, and they were beating him, my good sir, they were killing him. I screamed. Just then the man who had come in alone drew a revolver from his pocket; he fired and killed one of his assailants, who fell to the ground. I was so frightened that I crouched on the staircase and threw my apron over my head that I might not see the blood run. An instant later Monsieur Gevrol arrived with his men; they forced open the door, and behold—"

The Widow Chupin here stopped short. These wretched old women, who have trafficked in every sort of vice, and who have tasted every disgrace, at times attain a perfection of hypocrisy calculated to deceive the most subtle penetration. Any one unacquainted with the antecedents of the landlady of the Poivriere would certainly have been impressed by her apparent candor, so skilfully did she affect a display of frankness, surprise, and fear. Her expression would have been simply perfect, had it not been for her eyes, her small gray eyes, as restless as those

of a caged animal, and gleaming at intervals with craftiness and cunning.

There she stood, mentally rejoicing at the success of her narrative, for she was convinced that the magistrate placed implicit confidence in her revelations, although during her recital, delivered, by the way, with conjurer-like volubility, not a muscle of M. Segmuller's face had betrayed what was passing in his mind. When she paused, out of breath, he rose from his seat, and without a word approached his clerk to inspect the notes taken during the earlier part of the examination.

From the corner where he was quietly seated, Lecoq did not cease watching the prisoner. "She thinks that it's all over," he muttered to himself; "she fancies that her deposition is accepted without question."

If such were, indeed, the widow's opinion, she was soon to be undeceived; for, after addressing a few low-spoken words to the smiling Goguet, M. Segmuller took a seat near the fireplace, convinced that the moment had now come to abandon defensive tactics, and open fire on the enemy's position.

"So, Widow Chupin," he began, "you tell us that you didn't remain for a single moment with the people who came into your shop that evening!"

"Not a moment."

"They came in and ordered what they wanted; you waited on them, and then left them to themselves?"

"Yes, my good sir."

"It seems to me impossible that you didn't overhear some words of their conversation. What were they talking about?"

"I am not in the habit of playing spy over my customers."

"Didn't you hear anything?"

"Nothing at all."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders with an air of commiseration. "In other words," he remarked, "you refuse to inform justice—"

"Oh, my good sir!"

"Allow me to finish. All these improbable stories about leaving the shop and mending your son's clothes in your bedroom are so many inventions. You have concocted them so as to be able to say to me: 'I didn't see anything; I didn't hear anything.' If such is your system of defense, I warn you that it will be impossible for you to maintain it, and I may add that it would not be admitted by any tribunal."

"It is not a system of defense; it is the truth."

M. Segmuller seemed to reflect for a moment; then, suddenly, he exclaimed: "Then you have nothing to tell me about this miserable assassin?"

"But he is not an assassin, my good sir."

"What do you mean by such an assertion?"

"I mean that he only killed the others in protecting himself. They picked a quarrel with him; he was alone against three, and saw very plainly that he could expect no mercy from brigands who—"

The color rose to the Widow Chupin's cheeks, and she suddenly checked herself, greatly embarrassed, and evidently regretting that she had not bridled her tongue. It is true she might reasonably hope, that the magistrate had imperfectly heard her words, and had failed to seize their full purport, for two or three red-hot coals having fallen from the grate on the hearth, he had taken up the tongs, and seemed to be engrossed in the task of artistically arranging the fire.

"Who can tell me—who can prove to me that, on the contrary, it was not this man who first attacked the others?" he murmured, thoughtfully.

"I can," stoutly declared the widow, already forgetful of her prudent hesitation, "I can swear it."

M. Segmuller looked up, intense astonishment written upon his face. "How can you know that?" he said slowly. "How can you swear it? You were in your bedroom when the quarrel began."

Silent and motionless in his corner, Lecoq was inwardly jubilant. This was a most happy result, he thought, but a few questions more, and the old woman would be obliged to contradict herself. What she had already said sufficed to show that she must have a secret interest in the matter, or else she would never have been so imprudently earnest in defending the prisoner.

"However, you have probably been led to this conclusion by your knowledge of the murderer's character," remarked M. Segmuller, "you are apparently well acquainted with him."

"Oh, I had never set eyes on him before that evening."

"But he must have been in your establishment before?"

"Never in his life."

"Oh, oh! Then how do you explain that on entering the shop while you were upstairs, this unknown person—this

stranger—should have called out: 'Here, old woman!' Did he merely *guess* that the establishment was kept by a woman; and that this woman was no longer young?"

"He did not say that."

"Reflect a moment; you, yourself just told me so."

"Oh, I didn't say that, I'm sure, my good sir."

"Yes, you did, and I will prove it by having your evidence read. Goguet, read the passage, if you please."

The smiling clerk looked back through his minutes and then, in his clearest voice, he read these words, taken down as they fell from the Widow Chupin's lips: "I had been upstairs about half an hour, when I heard some one below call out 'Eh! old woman.' So I went down," etc., etc.

"Are you convinced?" asked M. Segmuller.

The old offender's assurance was sensibly diminished by this proof of her prevarication. However, instead of discussing the subject any further, the magistrate glided over it as if he did not attach much importance to the incident.

"And the other men," he resumed, "those who were killed: did you know them?"

"No, good sir, no more than I knew Adam and Eve."

"And were you not surprised to see three men utterly unknown to you, and accompanied by two women, enter your establishment?"

"Sometimes chance—"

"Come! you do not think of what you are saying. It was not chance that brought these customers, in the middle of the night, to a wine-shop with a reputation like yours—an establishment situated far from any frequented route in the midst of a desolate waste."

"I'm not a sorceress; I say what I think."

"Then you did not even know the youngest of the victims, the man who was attired as a soldier, he who was named Gustave?"

"Not at all."

M. Segmuller noted the intonation of this response, and then slowly added: "But you must have heard of one of Gustave's friends, a man called Lacheneur?"

On hearing this name, the landlady of the Poivriere became visibly embarrassed, and it was in an altered voice that she stammered: "Lacheneur! Lacheneur! no, I have never heard that name mentioned."

Still despite her denial, the effect of M. Segmuller's remark was evident, and Lecoq secretly vowed that he would find this Lacheneur, at any cost. Did not the "articles of conviction" comprise a letter sent by this man to Gustave, and written, so Lecoq had reason to believe, in a café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais? With such a clue and a little patience, the mysterious Lacheneur might yet be discovered.

"Now," continued M. Segmuller, "let us speak of the women who accompanied these unfortunate men. What sort of women were they?"

"Oh! women of no account whatever!"

"Were they well dressed?"

"On the contrary, very miserably."

"Well, give me a description of them."

"They were tall and powerfully built, and indeed, as it was Shrove Sunday, I first of all took them for men in disguise. They had hands like shoulders of mutton, gruff voices, and very black hair. They were as dark as mulattoes—"

"Enough!" interrupted the magistrate, "I require no further proof of your mendacity. These women were short, and one of them was remarkably fair."

"I swear to you, my good sir—"

"Do not declare it upon oath. I shall be forced to confront you with an honest man, who will tell you to your face that you are a liar!"

The widow did not reply, and there was a moment's silence. M. Segmuller determined to deal a decisive blow. "Do you also affirm that you had nothing of a compromising character in the pocket of your apron?" he asked.

"Nothing—you may have it examined; it was left in the house."

"Then you still persist in your system," resumed M. Segmuller. "Believe me, you are wrong. Reflect—it rests with you to go to the Assize Court as a witness, or an accomplice."

Although the widow seemed crushed by this unexpected blow, the magistrate did not add another word. Her deposition was read over to her, she signed it, and was then led away.

M. Segmuller immediately seated himself at his desk, filled up a blank form and handed it to his clerk, saying: "This is an order for the governor of the Depot. Tell him to send the supposed murderer here at once."

X

IF it is difficult to extort a confession from a man interested in preserving silence and persuaded that no proofs can be produced against him, it is a yet more arduous task to make a woman, similarly situated, speak the truth. As they say at the Palais de Justice, one might as well try to make the devil confess.

The examination of the Widow Chupin had been conducted with the greatest possible care by M. Segmuller, who was as skilful in managing his questions as a tried general in maneuvring his troops.

However, all that he had discovered was that the landlady of the Poivriere was conniving with the murderer. The motive of her connivance was yet unknown, and the murderer's identity still a mystery. Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were nevertheless of the opinion that the old hag knew everything. "It is almost certain," remarked the magistrate, "that she was acquainted with the people who came to her house—with the women, the victims, the murderer—with all of them, in fact. I am positive as regards that fellow Gustave—I read it in her eyes. I am also convinced that she knows Lacheneur—the man upon whom the dying soldier breathed vengeance—the mysterious personage who evidently possesses the key to the enigma. That man must be found."

"Ah!" replied Lecoq, "and I will find him even if I have to question every one of the eleven hundred thousand men who constantly walk the streets of Paris!"

This was promising so much that the magistrate, despite his preoccupation, could not repress a smile.

"If this old woman would only decide to make a clean breast of it at her next examination!" remarked Lecoq.

"Yes. But she won't."

The young detective shook his head despondingly. Such was his own opinion. He did not delude himself with false hopes, and he had noticed between the Widow Chupin's eyebrows

those furrows which, according to physiognomists, indicate a senseless, brutish obstinacy.

"Women never confess," resumed the magistrate; "and even when they seemingly resign themselves to such a course they are not sincere. They fancy they have discovered some means of misleading their examiner. On the contrary, evidence will crush the most obstinate man; he gives up the struggle, and confesses. Now, a woman scoffs at evidence. Show her the sun; tell her it's daytime; at once she will close her eyes and say to you, 'No, it's night.' Male prisoners plan and combine different systems of defense according to their social positions; the women, on the contrary, have but one system, no matter what may be their condition in life. They deny everything, persist in their denials even when the proof against them is overwhelming, and then they cry. When I worry the Chupin with disagreeable questions, at her next examination, you may be sure she will turn her eyes into a fountain of tears."

In his impatience, M. Segmuller angrily stamped his foot. He had many weapons in his arsenal; but none strong enough to break a woman's dogged resistance.

"If I only understood the motive that guides this old hag!" he continued. "But not a clue! Who can tell me what powerful interest induces her to remain silent? Is it her own cause that she is defending? Is she an accomplice? Is it certain that she did not aid the murderer in planning an ambuscade?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq, slowly, "yes; this supposition very naturally presents itself to the mind. But think a moment, sir, such a theory would prove that the idea we entertained a short time since is altogether false. If the Widow Chupin is an accomplice, the murderer is not the person we have supposed him to be; he is simply the man he seems to be."

This argument apparently convinced M. Segmuller. "What is your opinion?" he asked.

The young detective had formed his opinion a long while ago. But how could he, a humble police agent, venture to express any decided views when the magistrate hesitated? He understood well enough that his position necessitated extreme reserve; hence, it was in the most modest tone that he replied: "Might not the pretended drunkard have dazzled Mother Chupin's eyes with the prospect of a brilliant reward? Might he not have promised her a considerable sum of money?"

He paused; Goguet, the smiling clerk, had just returned.

Behind him stood a private of the Garde de Paris who remained respectfully on the threshold, his heels in a straight line, his right hand raised to the peak of his shako, and his elbow on a level with his eyes, in accordance with the regulations.

"The governor of the Depot," said the soldier, "sends me to inquire if he is to keep the Widow Chupin in solitary confinement; she complains bitterly about it."

M. Segmuller reflected for a moment. "Certainly," he murmured, as if replying to an objection made by his own conscience; "certainly, it is an undoubted aggravation of suffering; but if I allow this woman to associate with the other prisoners, she will certainly find some opportunity to communicate with parties outside. This must not be; the interests of justice and truth must be considered first." The thought embodied in these last words decided him. "Despite her complaints the prisoner must be kept in solitary confinement until further orders," he said.

The soldier allowed his right hand to fall to his side, he carried his right foot three inches behind his left heel, and wheeled around. Goguet, the smiling clerk, then closed the door, and, drawing a large envelope from his pocket, handed it to the magistrate. "Here is a communication from the governor of the Depot," said he.

The magistrate broke the seal, and read aloud, as follows: "I feel compelled to advise M. Segmuller to take every precaution with the view of assuring his own safety before proceeding with the examination of the prisoner, May. Since his unsuccessful attempt at suicide, this prisoner has been in such a state of excitement that we have been obliged to keep him in a straitwaistcoat. He did not close his eyes all last night, and the guards who watched him expected every moment that he would become delirious. However, he did not utter a word. When food was offered him this morning, he resolutely rejected it, and I should not be surprised if it were his intention to starve himself to death. I have rarely seen a more determined criminal. I think him capable of any desperate act."

"Ah!" exclaimed the clerk, whose smile had disappeared, "If I were in your place, sir, I would only let him in here with an escort of soldiers."

"What! you—Goguet, you, an old clerk—make such a proposition! Can it be that you're frightened?"

"Frightened! No, certainly not; but—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, in a tone that betrayed superlative confidence in his own muscles; "Am I not here?"

If M. Segmuller had seated himself at his desk, that article of furniture would naturally have served as a rampart between the prisoner and himself. For purposes of convenience he usually did place himself behind it; but after Goguet's display of fear, he would have blushed to have taken the slightest measure of self-protection. Accordingly, he went and sat down by the fireplace—as he had done a few moments previously while questioning the Widow Chupin—and then ordered his door-keeper to admit the prisoner alone. He emphasized this word "alone."

A moment later the door was flung open with a violent jerk, and the prisoner entered, or rather precipitated himself into the room. Goguet turned pale behind his table, and Lecoq advanced a step forward, ready to spring upon the prisoner and pinion him should it be requisite. But when the latter reached the centre of the room, he paused and looked around him. "Where is the magistrate?" he inquired, in a hoarse voice.

"I am the magistrate," replied M. Segmuller.

"No, the other one."

"What other one?"

"The one who came to question me last evening."

"He has met with an accident. Yesterday, after leaving you, he fell down and broke his leg."

"Oh!"

"And I am to take his place."

The prisoner was apparently deaf to the explanation. Excitement had seemingly given way to stupor. His features, hitherto contracted with anger, now relaxed. He grew pale and tottered, as if about to fall.

"Compose yourself," said the magistrate in a benevolent tone; "if you are too weak to remain standing, take a seat."

Already, with a powerful effort, the man had recovered his self-possession. A momentary gleam flashed from his eyes. "Many thanks for your kindness," he replied, "but this is nothing. I felt a slight sensation of dizziness, but it is over now."

"Is it long since you have eaten anything?"

"I have eaten nothing since that man"—and so saying he pointed to Lecoq—"brought me some bread and wine at the station house."

"Wouldn't you like to take something?"

"No—and yet—if you would be so kind—I should like a glass of water."

"Will you not have some wine with it?"

"I should prefer pure water."

His request was at once complied with. He drained a first glassful at a single draft; the glass was then replenished and he drank again, this time, however, more slowly. One might have supposed that he was drinking in life itself. Certainly, when he laid down the empty glass, he seemed quite another man.

Eighteen out of every twenty criminals who appear before our investigating magistrates come prepared with a more or less complete plan of defense, which they have conceived during their preliminary confinement. Innocent or guilty, they have resolved on playing some part or other, which they begin to act as soon as they cross the threshold of the room where the magistrate awaits them.

The moment they enter his presence, the magistrate needs to bring all his powers of penetration into play; for such a culprit's first attitude as surely betrays his plan of defense as an index reveals a book's contents. In this case, however, M. Segmuller did not think that appearances were deceitful. It seemed evident to him that the prisoner was not feigning, but that the excited frenzy which marked his entrance was as real as his after stupor.

At all events, there seemed no fear of the danger the governor of the Depot had spoken of, and accordingly M. Segmuller seated himself at his desk. Here he felt stronger and more at ease for his back being turned to the window, his face was half hidden in shadow; and in case of need, he could, by bending over his papers, conceal any sign of surprise or discomfiture.

The prisoner, on the contrary, stood in the full light, and not a movement of his features, not the fluttering of an eyelid could escape the magistrate's attention. He seemed to have completely recovered from his indisposition; and his features assumed an expression which indicated either careless indifference, or complete resignation.

"Do you feel better?" asked M. Segmuller.

"I feel very well."

"I hope," continued the magistrate, paternally, "that in future you will know how to moderate your excitement. Yesterday

you tried to destroy yourself. It would have been another great crime added to many others—a crime which—"

With a hasty movement of the hand, the prisoner interrupted him. "I have committed no crime," said he, in a rough, but no longer threatening voice. "I was attacked, and I defended myself. Any one has a right to do that. There were three men against me. It was a great misfortune; and I would give my right hand to repair it; but my conscience does not reproach me—that much!"

The prisoner's "that much," was a contemptuous snap of his finger and thumb.

"And yet I've been arrested and treated like an assassin," he continued. "When I saw myself interred in that living tomb which you call a secret cell, I grew afraid; I lost my senses. I said to myself: 'My boy, they've buried you alive; and it is better to die—to die quickly, if you don't wish to suffer.' So I tried to strangle myself. My death wouldn't have caused the slightest sorrow to any one. I have neither wife nor child depending upon me for support. However, my attempt was frustrated. I was bled; and then placed in a strait-waistcoat, as if I were a madman. Mad! I really believed I should become so. All night long the jailors sat around me, like children amusing themselves by tormenting a chained animal. They watched me, talked about me, and passed the candle to and fro before my eyes."

The prisoner talked forcibly, but without any attempt at oratorical display; there was bitterness but not anger in his tone; in short, he spoke with all the seeming sincerity of a man giving expression to some deep emotion or conviction. As the magistrate and the detective heard him speak, they were seized with the same idea. "This man," they thought, "is very clever; it won't be easy to get the better of him."

Then, after a moment's reflection, M. Segmuller added aloud: "This explains your first act of despair; but later on, for instance, even this morning, you refused to eat the food that was offered you."

As the prisoner heard this remark, his lowering face suddenly brightened, he gave a comical wink, and finally burst into a hearty laugh, gay, frank, and sonorous.

"That," said he, "is quite another matter. Certainly, I refused all they offered me, and now I will tell you why. As I had my hands confined in the strait-waistcoat, the jailor

tried to feed me just as a nurse tries to feed a baby with pap. Now I wasn't going to submit to that, so I closed my lips as tightly as I could. Then he tried to force my mouth open and push the spoon in, just as one might force a sick dog's jaws apart and pour some medicine down its throat. The deuce take his impertinence! I tried to bite him: that's the truth, and if I had succeeded in getting his finger between my teeth, it would have stayed there. However, because I wouldn't be fed like a baby, all the prison officials raised their hands to heaven in holy horror, and pointed at me, saying: 'What a terrible man! What an awful rascal!' "

The prisoner seemed to thoroughly enjoy the recollection of the scene he had described, for he now burst into another hearty laugh, to the great amazement of Lecoq, and the scandal of Goguet, the smiling clerk.

M. Segmuller also found it difficult to conceal his surprise. "You are too reasonable, I hope," he said, at last, "to attach any blame to these men, who, in confining you in a strait-waistcoat, were merely obeying the orders of their superior officers with the view of protecting you from your own violent passions."

"Hum!" responded the prisoner, suddenly growing serious. "I do blame them, however, and if I had one of them in a corner— But, never mind, I shall get over it. If I know myself aright, I have no more spite in my composition than a chicken."

"Your treatment depends on your own conduct," rejoined M. Segmuller, "If you will only remain calm, you shan't be put in a strait-waistcoat again. But you must promise me that you will be quiet and conduct yourself properly."

The murderer sadly shook his head. "I shall be very prudent hereafter," said he, "but it is terribly hard to stay in prison with nothing to do. If I had some comrades with me, we could laugh and chat, and the time would slip by; but it is positively horrible to have to remain alone, entirely alone, in that cold, damp cell, where not a sound can be heard."

The magistrate bent over his desk to make a note. The word "comrades" had attracted his attention, and he proposed to ask the prisoner to explain it at a later stage of the inquiry.

"If you are innocent," he remarked, "you will soon be released: but it is necessary to prove your innocence."

"What must I do to prove it?"

"Tell the truth, the whole truth; answer my questions honestly without reserve."

"As for that, you may depend upon me." As he spoke the prisoner lifted his hand, as if to call upon God to witness his sincerity.

But M. Segmuller immediately intervened: "Prisoners do not take the oath," said he.

"Indeed!" ejaculated the man with an astonished air, "that's strange!"

Although the magistrate had apparently paid but little attention to the prisoner, he had in point of fact carefully noted his attitude, his tone of voice, his looks and gestures. M. Segmuller had, moreover, done his utmost to set the culprit's mind at ease, to quiet all possible suspicion of a trap, and his inspection of the prisoner's person led him to believe that this result had been attained.

"Now," said he, "you will give me your attention; and do not forget that your liberty depends upon your frankness. What is your name?"

"May."

"What is your Christian name?"

"I have none."

"That is impossible."

"I have been told that already three times since yesterday," rejoined the prisoner impatiently. "And yet it's the truth. If I were a liar, I could easily tell you that my name was Peter, James, or John. But lying is not in my line. Really, I have no Christian name. If it were a question of surnames, it would be quite another thing. I have had plenty of them."

"What were they?"

"Let me see—to commence with, when I was with Father Fougasse, I was called Affiloir, because you see—"

"Who was this Father Fougasse?"

"The great wild beast tamer, sir. Ah! he could boast of a menagerie and no mistake! Lions, tigers, and bears, serpents as big round as your thigh, parrakeets of every color under the sun. Ah! it was a wonderful collection. But unfortunately—"

Was the man jesting, or was he in earnest? It was so hard to decide, that M. Segmuller and Lecoq were equally in doubt. As for Goguet, the smiling clerk, he chuckled to himself as his pen ran over the paper.

"Enough," interrupted the magistrate. "How old are you?"

"Forty-four or forty-five years of age."

"Where were you born?"

"In Brittany, probably."

M. Segmuller thought he could detect a hidden vein of irony in this reply.

"I warn you," said he, severely, "that if you go on in this way your chances of recovering your liberty will be greatly compromised. Each of your answers is a breach of propriety."

As the supposed murderer heard these words, an expression of mingled distress and anxiety was apparent in his face. "Ah! I meant no offense, sir," he sighed. "You questioned me, and I replied. You will see that I have spoken the truth, if you will allow me to recount the history of the whole affair."

"When the prisoner speaks, the prosecution is enlightened," so runs an old proverb frequently quoted at the Palais de Justice. It does, indeed, seem almost impossible for a culprit to say more than a few words in an investigating magistrate's presence, without betraying his intentions or his thoughts; without, in short, revealing more or less of the secret he is endeavoring to conceal. All criminals, even the most simple-minded, understand this, and those who are shrewd prove remarkably reticent. Confining themselves to the few facts upon which they have founded their defense, they are careful not to travel any further unless absolutely compelled to do so, and even then they only speak with the utmost caution. When questioned, they reply, of course, but always briefly; and they are very sparing of details.

In the present instance, however, the prisoner was prodigal of words. He did not seem to think that there was any danger of his being the medium of accomplishing his own decapitation. He did not hesitate like those who are afraid of misplacing a word of the romance they are substituting for the truth. Under other circumstances, this fact would have been a strong argument in his favor.

"You may tell your own story, then," said M. Segmuller in answer to the prisoner's indirect request.

The presumed murderer did not try to hide the satisfaction he experienced at thus being allowed to plead his own cause, in his own way. His eyes sparkled and his nostrils dilated as if with pleasure. He sat himself down, threw his head back,

passed his tongue over his lips as if to moisten them, and said: "Am I to understand that you wish to hear my history?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that one day about forty-five years ago, Father Tringlot, the manager of a traveling acrobatic company, was going from Guingamp to Saint Brieuc, in Brittany. He had with him two large vehicles containing his wife, the necessary theatrical paraphernalia, and the members of the company. Well, soon after passing Chatelaudren, he perceived something white lying by the roadside, near the edge of a ditch. 'I must go and see what that is,' he said to his wife. He stopped the horses, alighted from the vehicle he was in, went to the ditch, picked up the object he had noticed, and uttered a cry of surprise. You will ask me what he had found? Ah! good heavens! A mere trifle. He had found your humble servant, then about six months old."

With these last words, the prisoner made a low bow to his audience.

"Naturally, Father Tringlot carried me to his wife. She was a kind-hearted woman. She took me, examined me, fed me, and said: 'He's a strong, healthy child; and we'll keep him since his mother has been so wicked as to abandon him by the roadside. I will teach him; and in five or six years he will be a credit to us.' They then asked each other what name they should give me, and as it happened to be the first day of May, they decided to call me after the month, and so it happens that May has been my name from that day to this."

The prisoner paused again and looked from one to another of his listeners, as if seeking some sign of approval. None being forthcoming, he proceeded with his story.

"Father Tringlot was an uneducated man, entirely ignorant of the law. He did not inform the authorities that he had found a child, and, for this reason, although I was living, I did not legally exist, for, to have a legal existence it is necessary that one's name, parentage, and birthplace should figure upon a municipal register.

"When I grew older, I rather congratulated myself on Father Tringlot's neglect. 'May, my boy,' said I, 'you are not put down on any government register, consequently there's no fear of your ever being drawn as a soldier.' I had a horror of military service, and a positive dread of bullets and cannon balls. Later on, when I had passed the proper age for the conscription, a

lawyer told me that I should get into all kinds of trouble if I sought a place on the civil register so late in the day; and so I decided to exist surreptitiously. And this is why I have no Christian name, and why I can't exactly say where I was born."

If truth has any particular accent of its own, as moralists have asserted, the murderer had found that accent. Voice, gesture, glance, expression, all were in accord; not a word of his long story had rung false.

"Now," said M. Segmuller, coldly, "what are your means of subsistence?"

By the prisoner's discomfited mien one might have supposed that he had expected to see the prison doors fly open at the conclusion of his narrative. "I have a profession," he replied plaintively. "The one that Mother Tringlot taught me. I subsist by its practise; and I have lived by it in France and other countries."

The magistrate thought he had found a flaw in the prisoner's armor. "You say you have lived in foreign countries?" he inquired.

"Yes; during the seventeen years that I was with M. Simpson's company, I traveled most of the time in England and Germany."

"Then you are a gymnast and an athlete. How is it that your hands are so white and soft?"

Far from being embarrassed, the prisoner raised his hands from his lap and examined them with evident complacency. "It is true they are pretty," said he, "but this is because I take good care of them and scarcely use them."

"Do they pay you, then, for doing nothing?"

"Ah, no, indeed! But, sir, my duty consists in speaking to the public, in turning a compliment, in making things pass off pleasantly, as the saying is; and, without boasting, I flatter myself that I have a certain knack—"

M. Segmuller stroked his chin, according to his habit whenever he considered that a prisoner had committed some grave blunder. "In that case," said he, "will you give me a specimen of your talent?"

"Ah, ha!" laughed the prisoner, evidently supposing this to be a jest on the part of the magistrate. "Ah, ha!"

"Obey me, if you please," insisted M. Segmuller.

The supposed murderer made no objection. His face at once assumed a different expression, his features wearing a

mingled air of impudence, conceit, and irony. He caught up a ruler that was lying on the magistrate's desk, and, flourishing it wildly, began as follows, in a shrill falsetto voice: "Silence, music! And you, big drum, hold your peace! Now is the hour, now is the moment, ladies and gentlemen, to witness the grand, unique performance of these great artists, unequaled in the world for their feats upon the trapeze and the tight-rope, and in innumerable other exercises of grace, suppleness, and strength!"

"That is sufficient," interrupted the magistrate. "You can speak like that in France; but what do you say in Germany?"

"Of course, I use the language of that country."

"Let me hear, then!" retorted M. Segmuller, whose mother tongue was German.

The prisoner ceased his mocking manner, assumed an air of comical importance, and without the slightest hesitation began to speak as follows, in very emphatic tones: "Mit Bewilligung der hochloeblichen Obrigkeit, wird heute, vor hiesiger ehrenwerthen Burgerschaft, zum erstenmal aufgefuhrt—Genovesa, oder—"

This opening of the prisoner's German harangue may be thus rendered: "With the permission of the local authorities there will now be presented before the honorable citizens, for the first time—Genevieve, or the—"

"Enough," said the magistrate, harshly. He rose, perhaps to conceal his chargin, and added: "We will send for an interpreter to tell us whether you speak English as fluently."

On hearing these words, Lecoq modestly stepped forward. "I understand English," said he.

"Very well. You hear, prisoner?"

But the man was already transformed. British gravity and apathy were written upon his features; his gestures were stiff and constrained, and in the most ponderous tones he exclaimed: "Walk up! ladies and gentlemen, walk up! Long life to the queen and to the honorable mayor of this town! No country, England excepted—our glorious England!—could produce such a marvel, such a paragon—" For a minute or two longer he continued in the same strain.

M. Segmuller was leaning upon his desk, his face hidden by his hands. Lecoq, standing in front of the prisoner, could not conceal his astonishment. Goguet, the smiling clerk, alone found the scene amusing.

THE governor of the depot, a functionary who had gained the reputation of an oracle by twenty years' experience in prisons and with prisoners—a man whom it was most difficult to deceive—had advised the magistrate to surround himself with every precaution before examining the prisoner, May.

And yet this man, characterized as a most dangerous criminal, and the very announcement of whose coming had made the clerk turn pale, had proved to be a practical, harmless, and jovial philosopher, vain of his eloquence, a bohemian whose existence depended upon his ability to turn a compliment; in short, a somewhat erratic genius.

This was certainly strange, but the seeming contradiction did not cause M. Segmuller to abandon the theory propounded by Lecoq. On the contrary, he was more than ever convinced of its truth. If he remained silent, with his elbows leaning on the desk, and his hands clasped over his eyes, it was only that he might gain time for reflection.

The prisoner's attitude and manner were remarkable. When his English harangue was finished, he remained standing in the centre of the room, a half-pleased, half-anxious expression on his face. Still, he was as much at ease as if he had been on the platform outside some stroller's booth, where, if one could believe his story, he had passed the greater part of his life. It was in vain that the magistrate sought for some indication of weakness on his features, which in their mobility were more enigmatical than the lineaments of the Sphinx.

Thus far, M. Segmuller had been worsted in the encounter. It is true, however, that he had not as yet ventured on any direct attack, nor had he made use of any of the weapons which Lecoq had forged for his use. Still he was none the less annoyed at his defeat, as it was easy to see by the sharp manner in which he raised his head after a few moments' silence. "I see that you speak three European languages correctly," said he. "It is a rare talent."

The prisoner bowed, and smiled complacently. "Still that does not establish your identity," continued the magistrate. "Have you any acquaintances in Paris? Can you indicate any respectable person who will vouch for the truth of this story?"

"Ah! sir, it is seventeen years since I left France."

"That is unfortunate, but the prosecution can not content itself with such an explanation. What about your last employer, M. Simpson? Who is he?"

"M. Simpson is a rich man," replied the prisoner, rather coldly, "worth more than two hundred thousand francs, and honest besides. In Germany he traveled with a show of marionettes, and in England with a collection of phenomena to suit the tastes of that country."

"Very well! Then this millionaire could testify in your favor; it would be easy to find him, I suppose?"

"Certainly," responded May, emphatically. "M. Simpson would willingly do me this favor. It would not be difficult for me to find him, only it would require considerable time."

"Why?"

"Because at the present moment he must be on his way to America. It was on account of this journey that I left his company—I detest the ocean."

A moment previously Lecoq's anxiety had been so intense that his heart almost stopped beating; on hearing these last words, however, he regained all his self-possession. As for the magistrate, he merely greeted the murderer's reply with a brief but significant ejaculation.

"When I say that he is on his way," resumed the prisoner, "I may be mistaken. He may not have started yet, though he had certainly made all his arrangements before we separated."

"What ship was he to sail by?"

"He did not tell me."

"Where was he when you left him?"

"At Leipsic."

"When was this?"

"Last Wednesday."

M. Segmuller shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "So you say you were in Leipsic on Wednesday? How long have you been in Paris?"

"Since Sunday afternoon, at four o'clock."

"It will be necessary to prove that."

Judging by the murderer's contracted brow it might be con-

jectured that he was making a strenuous effort to remember something. He cast questioning glances first toward the ceiling and then toward the floor, scratching his head and tapping his foot in evident perplexity. "How *can* I prove it—how?" he murmured.

The magistrate did not appear disposed to wait. "Let me assist you," said he. "The people at the inn where you boarded while in Leipsic must remember you."

"We did not stop at an inn."

"Where did you eat and sleep, then?"

"In M. Simpson's large traveling-carriage; it had been sold, but he was not to give it up until he reached the port he was to sail from."

"What port was that?"

"I don't know."

At this reply Lecoq, who had less experience than the magistrate in the art of concealing one's impressions, could not help rubbing his hands with satisfaction. The prisoner was plainly convicted of falsehood, indeed driven into a corner.

"So you have only your own word to offer in support of this story?" inquired M. Segmuller.

"Wait a moment," said the prisoner, extending his arm as if to clutch at a still vague inspiration—"wait a moment. When I arrived in Paris I had with me a trunk containing my clothes. The linen is all marked with the first letter of my name, and besides some ordinary coats and trousers, there were a couple of costumes I used to wear when I appeared in public."

"Well, what have you done with all these things?"

"When I arrived in Paris, I took the trunk to a hotel, close by the Northern railway station—"

"Go on. Tell us the name of this hotel," said M. Segmuller, perceiving that the prisoner had stopped short, evidently embarrassed.

"That's just what I'm trying to recollect. I've forgotten it. But I haven't forgotten the house. I fancy I can see it now; and, if some one would only take me to the neighborhood, I should certainly recognize it. The people at the hotel would know me, and, besides, my trunk would prove the truth of what I've told you."

On hearing this statement, Lecoq mentally resolved to make a tour of investigation through the various hotels surrounding the Gare du Nord.

"Very well," retorted the magistrate. "Perhaps we will do as you request. Now, there are two questions I desire to ask. If you arrived in Paris at four o'clock in the afternoon, how did it happen that by midnight of the same day you had discovered the Poivriere, which is merely frequented by suspicious characters, and is situated in such a lonely spot that it would be impossible to find it at night-time, if one were not familiar with the surrounding localities? In the second place, how does it happen, if you possess such clothing as you describe, that you are so poorly dressed?"

The prisoner smiled at these questions. "I can easily explain that," he replied. "One's clothes are soon spoiled when one travels third-class, so on leaving Leipsic I put on the worst things I had. When I arrived here, and felt my feet on the pavements of Paris, I went literally wild with delight. I acted like a fool. I had some money in my pocket—it was Shrove Sunday—and my only thought was to make a night of it. I did not think of changing my clothes. As I had formerly been in the habit of amusing myself round about the Barrière d'Italie, I hastened there and entered a wine-shop. While I was eating a morsel, two men came in and began talking about spending the night at a ball at the Rainbow. I asked them to take me with them; they agreed, I paid their bills, and we started. But soon after our arrival there these young men left me and joined the dancers. It was not long before I grew weary of merely looking on. Rather disappointed, I left the inn, and being foolish enough not to ask my way, I wandered on till I lost myself, while traversing a tract of unoccupied land. I was about to go back, when I saw a light in the distance. I walked straight toward it, and reached that cursed hovel."

"What happened then?"

"Oh! I went in; called for some one. A woman came downstairs, and I asked her for a glass of brandy. When she brought it, I sat down and lighted a cigar. Then I looked about me. The interior was almost enough to frighten one. Three men and two women were drinking and chatting in low tones at another table. My face did not seem to suit them. One of them got up, came toward me, and said: 'You are a police agent; you've come here to play the spy; that's very plain.' I answered that I wasn't a police agent. He replied that I was. I again declared that I wasn't. In short, he swore that he was sure of it, and that my beard was false. So saying,

he caught hold of my beard and pulled it. This made me mad. I jumped up, and with a blow of my fist I felled him to the ground. In an instant all the others were upon me! I had my revolver—you know the rest."

"And while all this was going on what were the two women doing?"

"Ah! I was too busy to pay any attention to them. They disappeared!"

"But you saw them when you entered the place—what were they like?"

"Oh! they were big, ugly creatures, as tall as grenadiers, and as dark as moles!"

Between plausible falsehood, and improbable truth, justice—human justice, and therefore liable to error—is compelled to decide as best it can. For the past hour M. Segmuller had not been free from mental disquietude. But all his doubts vanished when he heard the prisoner declare that the two women were tall and dark. If he had said: "The women were fair," M. Segmuller would not have known what to believe, but in the magistrate's opinion the audacious falsehood he had just heard proved that there was a perfect understanding between the supposed murderer and Widow Chupin.

Certainly, M. Segmuller's satisfaction was great; but his face did not betray it. It was of the utmost importance that the prisoner should believe that he had succeeded in deceiving his examiner. "You must understand how necessary it is to find these women," said the magistrate kindly.

"If their testimony corresponds with your allegations, your innocence will be proved conclusively."

"Yes, I understand that; but how can I put my hand upon them?"

"The police can assist you—our agents are always at the service of prisoners who desire to make use of them in establishing their innocence. Did you make any observations which might aid in the discovery of these women?"

Lecoq, whose eyes never wandered from the prisoner's face, fancied that he saw the faint shadow of a smile on the man's lips.

"I remarked nothing," said the prisoner coldly.

M. Segmuller had opened the drawer of his desk a moment before. He now drew from it the earring which had been found on the scene of the tragedy, and handing it abruptly to

the prisoner, he asked: "So you didn't notice this in the ear of one of the women?"

The prisoner's imperturbable coolness of demeanor did not forsake him. He took the jewel in his hand, examined it attentively, held it up to the light, admired its brilliant scintillations, and said: "It is a very handsome stone, but I didn't notice it."

"This stone," remarked the magistrate, "is a diamond."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and worth several thousand francs."

"So much as that!"

This exclamation may have been in accordance with the spirit of the part assumed by the prisoner; though, at the same time, its simplicity was undoubtedly far-fetched. It was strange that a nomad, such as the murderer pretended to have been, acquainted with most of the countries and capitals of Europe, should have displayed this astonishment on learning the value of a diamond. Still, M. Segmuller did not seem to notice the discrepancy.

"Another thing," said he. "When you threw down your pistol, crying, 'Come and take me,' what did you intend to do?"

"I intended to make my escape."

"In what way?"

"Why, of course, by the door, sir—by—"

"Yes, by the back door," retorted the magistrate, with freezing irony. "It remains for you to explain how you—you who had just entered that hovel for the first time—could have known of this door's existence."

For once, in the course of the examination, the prisoner seemed troubled. For an instant all his assurance forsook him. He evidently perceived the danger of his position, and after a considerable effort he contrived to burst out in a laugh. His laugh was a poor one, however; it rang false, and failed to conceal a sensation of deep anxiety. Growing gradually bolder, he at length exclaimed: "That's nonsense, I had just seen these two women go out by that very door."

"Excuse me, you declared a minute ago that you did not see these women leave: that you were too busy to watch their movements."

"Did I say that?"

"Word for word; the passage shall be shown you. Goguet, find it."

The clerk at once read the passage referred to, whereupon the prisoner undertook to show that the remark had been misunderstood. He had not said—at least, he did not intend to say —that; they had quite misinterpreted his words. With such remarks did he try to palliate the effect of his apparent blunders.

In the mean while, Lecoq was jubilant. "Ah, my fine fellow," thought he, "you are contradicting yourself—you are in deep water already—you are lost. There's no hope for you."

The prisoner's situation was indeed not unlike that of a bather, who, unable to swim, imprudently advances into the sea until the water rises above his chin. He may for a while have preserved his equilibrium, despite the buffeting of the waves, but now he totters, loses his footing—another second, and he will sink!

"Enough—enough!" said the magistrate, cutting the prisoner's embarrassed explanation short. "Now, if you started out merely with the intention of amusing yourself, how did it happen that you took your revolver with you?"

"I had it with me while I was traveling, and did not think of leaving it at the hotel any more than I thought of changing my clothes."

"Where did you purchase it?"

"It was given me by M. Simpson as a souvenir."

"Confess that this M. Simpson is a very convenient personage," said the magistrate coldly. "Still, go on with your story. Only two chambers of this murderous weapon were discharged, but three men were killed. You have not told me the end of the affair."

"What's the use?" exclaimed the prisoner, in saddened tones. "Two of my assailants had fallen; the struggle became an equal one. I seized the remaining man, the soldier, round the body, and threw him down. He fell against a corner of the table, and did not rise again."

M. Segmuller had unfolded upon his desk the plan of the Poivriere drawn by Lecoq. "Come here," he said, addressing the prisoner, "and show me on this paper the precise spot you and your adversaries occupied."

May obeyed, and with an assurance of manner a little surprising in a man in his position, he proceeded to explain the drama. "I entered," said he, "by this door, marked C; I seated myself at the table, H, to the left of the entrance: my assail-

ants occupied the table between the fireplace, F, and the window, B."

"I must admit," said the magistrate, "that your assertions fully agree with the statements of the physicians, who say that one of the shots must have been fired about a yard off, and the other about two yards off."

This was a victory for the prisoner, but he only shrugged his shoulders and murmured: "That proves that the physicians knew their business."

Lecoq was delighted. This part of the prisoner's narrative not merely agreed with the doctor's statements, but also confirmed his own researches. The young detective felt that, had he been the examiner, he would have conducted the investigation in precisely the same way. Accordingly, he thanked heaven that M. Segmuller had supplied the place of M. d'Escorval.

"This admitted," resumed the magistrate, "it remains for you to explain a sentence you uttered when the agent you see here arrested you."

"What sentence?"

"You exclaimed: 'Ah, it's the Prussians who are coming; I'm lost!' What did you mean by that?"

A fleeting crimson tinge suffused the prisoner's cheek. It was evident that if he had anticipated the other questions, and had been prepared for them, this one, at least, was unexpected. "It's very strange," said he, with ill-disguised embarrassment, "that I should have said such a thing!"

"Five persons heard you," insisted the magistrate.

The prisoner did not immediately reply. He was evidently trying to gain time, ransacking in his mind for a plausible explanation. "After all," he ultimately said, "the thing's quite possible. When I was with M. Simpson, we had with us an old soldier who had belonged to Napoleon's body-guard and had fought at Waterloo. I recollect he was always repeating that phrase. I must have caught the habit from him."

This explanation, though rather slow in coming, was none the less ingenious. At least, M. Segmuller appeared to be perfectly satisfied. "That's very plausible," said he; "but there is one circumstance that passes my comprehension. Were you freed from your assailants before the police entered the place? Answer me, yes or no."

"Yes."

"Then why, instead of making your escape by the back door,

the existence of which you had divined, did you remain on the threshold of the door leading into the back room, with a table before you to serve as a barricade, and your revolver leveled at the police, as if to keep them at bay?"

The prisoner hung his head, and the magistrate had to wait for his answer. "I was a fool," he stammered at last. "I didn't know whether these men were police agents or friends of the fellows I had killed."

"In either case your own interest should have induced you to fly."

The prisoner remained silent.

"Ah, well!" resumed M. Segmuller, "let me tell you my opinion. I believe you designedly and voluntarily exposed yourself to the danger of being arrested in order to protect the retreat of the two women who had just left."

"Why should I have risked my own safety for two hussies I did not even know?"

"Excuse me. The prosecution is strongly inclined to believe that you know these two women very well."

"I should like to see any one prove that!" So saying, the prisoner smiled sneeringly, but at once changed countenance when the magistrate retorted in a tone of assurance: "I will prove it."

XII

MAGISTRATES are frequently nonplussed when dealing with these difficult and delicate questions of personal identity. Railroads, photography, and telegraphic communication have multiplied the means of investigation in vain. Every day it happens that criminals succeed in deceiving justice in regard to their true personality, and thus escape the consequences of former crimes. This is indeed so frequently the case that an eminent French public prosecutor once ventured to remark: "Uncertainty as regards a criminal's identity will only cease when the law prescribes the branding of a number on the shoulder of every child whose birth is reported to the mayor."

M. Segmuller certainly wished that a number had been branded upon the enigmatical prisoner before him. And yet he did not by any means despair, and his confidence, exaggerated though it might be, was not at all feigned. He was of opinion that the weakest point of the prisoner's defense so far was his pretended ignorance concerning the two women. He proposed to return to this subject later on. In the mean while, however, there were other matters to be dealt with.

When he felt that his threat as regards the women had had time to produce its full effect, the magistrate continued: "So, prisoner, you assert that you were acquainted with none of the persons you met at the Poivriere."

"I swear it."

"Have you never had occasion to meet a person called Lacheneur, an individual whose name is connected with this unfortunate affair?"

"I heard the name for the first time when it was pronounced by the dying soldier. Poor fellow! I had just dealt him his death blow; and yet his last words testified to my innocence."

This sentimental outburst produced no impression whatever upon the magistrate. "In that case," said he, "I suppose you are willing to accept this soldier's statement."

The man hesitated, as if conscious that he had fallen into a snare, and that he would be obliged to weigh each answer carefully. "I accept it," said he at last. "Of course I accept it."

"Very well, then. This soldier, as you must recollect, wished to revenge himself on Lacheneur, who, by promising him a sum of money, had inveigled him into a conspiracy. A conspiracy against whom? Evidently against you; and yet you pretend that you had only arrived in Paris that evening, and that mere chance brought you to the Poivriere. Can you reconcile such conflicting statements?"

The prisoner had the hardihood to shrug his shoulders disdainfully. "I see the matter in an entirely different light," said he. "These people were plotting mischief against I don't know whom—and it was because I was in their way that they sought a quarrel with me, without any cause whatever."

Skilfully as the magistrate had delivered this thrust, it had been as skilfully parried; so skilfully, indeed, that Goguet, the smiling clerk, could not conceal an approving grimace. Besides, on principle, he always took the prisoner's part, in a mild, Platonic way, of course.

"Let us consider the circumstances that followed your arrest," resumed M. Segmuller. "Why did you refuse to answer all the questions put to you?"

A gleam of real or assumed resentment shone in the prisoner's eyes.

"This examination," he growled, "will alone suffice to make a culprit out of an innocent man!"

"I advise you, in your own interest, to behave properly. Those who arrested you observed that you were conversant with all the prison formalities and rules."

"Ah! sir, haven't I told you that I have been arrested and put in prison several times—always on account of my papers? I told you the truth, and you shouldn't taunt me for having done so."

The prisoner had dropped his mask of careless gaiety, and had assumed a surly, discontented tone. But his troubles were by no means ended; in fact, the battle had only just begun. Laying a tiny linen bag on his desk, M. Segmuller asked him if he recognized it.

"Perfectly! It is the package that the governor of the Depot placed in his safe."

The magistrate opened the bag, and poured the dust that it contained on to a sheet of paper. "You are aware, prisoner," said he, "that this dust comes from the mud that was sticking to your feet. The police agent who collected it has been to the station-house where you spent the night of the murder, and has discovered that the composition of this dust is identical with that of the floor of the cell you occupied."

The prisoner listened with gaping mouth.

"Hence," continued the magistrate, "it was certainly at the station-house, and *designedly*, that you soiled your feet with that mud. In doing so you had an object."

"I wished—"

"Let me finish. Being determined to keep your identity secret, and to assume the character of a member of the lower classes—of a mountebank, if you please—you reflected that the care you bestow upon your person might betray you. You foresaw the impression that would be caused when the coarse, ill-fitting boots you wore were removed, and the officials perceived your trim, clean feet, which are as well kept as your hands. Accordingly, what did you do? You poured some of the water that was in the pitcher in your cell on to the ground

and then dabbled your feet in the mud that had thus been formed."

During these remarks the prisoner's face wore, by turns, an expression of anxiety, astonishment, irony, and mirth. When the magistrate had finished, he burst into a hearty laugh.

"So that's the result of twelve or fourteen hours' research," he at length exclaimed, turning toward Lecoq. "Ah! Mr. Agent, it's good to be sharp, but not so sharp as that. The truth is, that when I was taken to the station-house, forty-eight hours—thirty-six of them spent in a railway carriage—had elapsed since I had taken off my boots. My feet were red and swollen, and they burned like fire. What did I do? I poured some water over them. As for your other suspicions, if I have a soft white skin, it is only because I take care of myself. Besides, as is usual with most men of my profession, I rarely wear anything but slippers on my feet. This is so true that, on leaving Leipsic, I only owned a single pair of boots, and that was an old cast-off pair given me by M. Simpson."

Lecoq struck his chest. "Fool, imbecile, idiot, that I am!" he thought. "He was waiting to be questioned about this circumstance. He is so wonderfully shrewd that, when he saw me take the dust, he divined my intentions; and since then he has managed to concoct this story—a plausible story enough—and one that any jury would believe."

M. Segmuller was saying the same thing to himself. But he was not so surprised nor so overcome by the skill the prisoner had displayed in fencing with this point. "Let us continue," said he. "Do you still persist in your statements, prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Very well; then I shall be forced to tell you that what you are saying is untrue."

The prisoner's lips trembled visibly, and it was with difficulty that he faltered: "May my first mouthful of bread strangle me, if I have uttered a single falsehood!"

"A single falsehood! Wait."

The magistrate drew from the drawer of his desk the molds of the footprints prepared by Lecoq, and showing them to the murderer, he said: "You told me a few minutes ago that the two women were as tall as grenadiers; now, just look at the footprints made by these female giants. They were as 'dark as moles,' you said; a witness will tell you that one of them was

a small, delicate-featured blonde, with an exceedingly sweet voice." He sought the prisoner's eyes, gazed steadily into them, and added slowly: "And this witness is the driver whose cab was hired in the Rue de Chevaleret by the two fugitives, both short, fair-haired women."

This sentence fell like a thunderbolt upon the prisoner; he grew pale, tottered, and leaned against the wall for support.

"Ah! you have told me the truth!" scornfully continued the pitiless magistrate. "Then, who is this man who was waiting for you while you were at the Poivriere? Who is this accomplice who, after your arrest, dared to enter the Widow Chupin's den to regain possession of some compromising object—no doubt a letter—which he knew he would find in the pocket of the Widow Chupin's apron? Who is this devoted, courageous friend who feigned drunkenness so effectually that even the police were deceived, and thoughtlessly placed him in confinement with you? Dare you deny that you have not arranged your system of defense in concert with him? Can you affirm that he did not give the Widow Chupin counsel as to the course she should pursue?"

But already, thanks to his power of self-control, the prisoner had mastered his agitation. "All this," said he, in a harsh voice, "is a mere invention of the police!"

However faithfully one may describe an examination of this kind, a narrative can convey no more idea of the real scene than a heap of cold ashes can give the effect of a glowing fire. One can note down each word, each ejaculation, but phraseology is powerless to portray the repressed animation, the impassioned movements, the studied reticence, the varied tones of voice, the now bold, now faltering glances, full of hatred and suspicion, which follow each other in rapid succession, mostly on the prisoner's side, but not entirely so, for although the magistrate may be an adept in the art of concealing his feelings, at times nature can not be controlled.

When the prisoner reeled beneath the magistrate's last words, the latter could not control his feelings. "He yields," he thought, "he succumbs—he is mine!"

But all hope of immediate success vanished when M. Segmuller saw his redoubtable adversary struggle against his momentary weakness, and arm himself for the fight with renewed, and, if possible, even greater energy. The magistrate perceived that it would require more than one assault to over-

come such a stubborn nature. So, in a voice rendered still more harsh by disappointment, he resumed: "It is plain that you are determined to deny evidence itself."

The prisoner had recovered all his self-possession. He must have bitterly regretted his weakness, for a fiendish spite glittered in his eyes. "What evidence!" he asked, frowning. "This romance invented by the police is very plausible, I don't deny it; but it seems to me that the truth is quite as probable. You talk to me about a cabman whose vehicle was hired by two short, fair-haired women: but who can prove that these women were the same that fled from the Poivriere?"

"The police agent you see here followed the tracks they left across the snow."

"Ah! at night-time—across fields intersected by ditches, and up a long street—a fine rain falling all the while, and a thaw already beginning! Oh, your story is very probable!"

As he spoke, the murderer extended his arm toward Lecoq, and then, in a tone of crushing scorn, he added: "A man must have great confidence in himself, or a wild longing for advancement, to try and get a man guillotined on such evidence as that!"

At these words, Goguet, the smiling clerk, whose pen was rapidly flying across the paper, could not help remarking to himself: "The arrow has entered the bull's-eye this time!"

The comment was not without foundation: for Lecoq was evidently cut to the quick. Indeed, he was so incensed that, forgetful of his subordinate position, he sprang to his feet, exclaiming: "This circumstance would be of slight importance if it were not one of a long chain—"

"Be good enough to keep silent," interrupted the magistrate, who, turning to the prisoner, added: "The court does not utilize the proofs and testimony collected by the police until it has examined and weighed them."

"No matter," murmured the prisoner. "I should like to see this cab-driver."

"Have no fear about that; he shall repeat his evidence in your presence."

"Very well. I am satisfied then. I will ask him how he can distinguish people's faces when it is as dark as—"

He checked himself, apparently enlightened by a sudden inspiration.

"How stupid I am!" he exclaimed. "I'm losing my temper

about these people when you know all the while who they are. For of course the cabmen drove them home."

M. Segmuller saw that the prisoner understood him. He perceived, moreover, that the latter was doing all he could to increase the mystery that enshrouded this essential point of the case—a point upon which the prosecution was particularly anxious to obtain information.

The prisoner was truly an incomparable comedian, for his last observation was made in a tone of remarkable candor, just tinged with sufficient irony to show that he felt he had nothing to fear in this direction.

"If you are consistent with yourself," remarked the magistrate, "you will also deny the existence of an accomplice, of a —comrade."

"What would be the use denying it, since you believe nothing that I say? Only a moment ago you insinuated that my former employer was an imaginary personage; so what need I say about my pretended accomplice? According to your agents, he's at all events a most faithful friend. Indeed, this wonderful being—invented by Monsieur" (with these words the prisoner pointed to Lecoq)—"was seemingly not satisfied at having once escaped the police, for, according to your account, he voluntarily placed himself in their clutches a second time. You gentlemen pretend that he conferred first of all with me, and next with the Widow Chupin. How did that happen? Perhaps after removing him from my cell, some of your agents obligingly shut him up with the old woman."

Goguet, the clerk, wrote all this down admiringly. "Here," thought he, "is a man of brain, who understands his case. He won't need any lawyer's eloquence to put his defense favorably before a jury."

"And after all," continued the prisoner, "what are the proofs against me? The name of Lacheneur faltered by a dying man; a few footprints on some melting snow; a sleepy cab-driver's declaration; and a vague doubt about a drunkard's identity. If that is all you have against me, it certainly doesn't amount to much—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "Your assurance is perfect now; though a moment ago your embarrassment was most remarkable. What was the cause of it?"

"The cause!" indignantly exclaimed the prisoner, whom this query had seemingly enraged; "the cause! Can't you see, sir,

that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly! I am an innocent man, and you are trying to deprive me of my life. You have been turning me this way and that way for so many hours that I begin to feel as if I were standing on the guillotine. Each time I open my mouth to speak I ask myself, is it this answer that will send me to the scaffold? My anxiety and dismay surprise you, do they? Why, since this examination began, I've felt the cold knife graze my neck at least twenty times. I wouldn't like my worst enemy to be subjected to such torture as this."

The prisoner's description of his sufferings did not seem at all exaggerated. His hair was saturated with perspiration, and big drops of sweat rested on his pallid brow, or coursed down his cheeks on to his beard.

"I am not your enemy," said the magistrate more gently. "A magistrate is neither a prisoner's friend nor enemy, he is simply the friend of truth and the executor of the law. I am not seeking either for an innocent man or for a culprit; I merely wish to arrive at the truth. I must know who you are—and I do know—"

"Ah!—if the assertion costs me my life—I'm May and none other."

"No, you are not."

"Who am I then? Some great man in disguise? Ah! I wish I were! In that case, I should have satisfactory papers to show you; and then you would set me free, for you know very well, my good sir, that I am as innocent as you are."

The magistrate had left his desk, and taken a seat by the fireplace within a yard of the prisoner. "Do not insist," said he. Then, suddenly changing both manner and tone, he added with the urbanity that a man of the world displays when addressing an equal:

"Do me the honor, sir, to believe me gifted with sufficient perspicuity to recognize, under the difficult part you play to such perfection, a very superior gentleman—a man endowed with remarkable talents."

Lecoq perceived that this sudden change of manner had unnerved the prisoner. He tried to laugh, but his merriment partook somewhat of the nature of a sob, and big tears glistened in his eyes.

"I will not torture you any longer," continued the magistrate. "In subtle reasoning I confess that you have conquered me.

However, when I return to the charge I shall have proofs enough in my possession to crush you."

He reflected for a moment, then lingering over each word, he added: "Only do not then expect from me the consideration I have shown you to-day. Justice is human; that is, she is indulgent toward certain crimes. She has fathomed the depth of the abyss into which blind passion may hurl even an honest man. To-day I freely offer you any assistance that will not conflict with my duty. Speak. Shall I send this officer of police away? Would you like me to send my clerk out of the room, on an errand?" He said no more, but waited to see the effect of this last effort.

The prisoner darted upon him one of those searching glances that seem to pierce an adversary through. His lips moved; one might have supposed that he was about to make a revelation. But no; suddenly he crossed his arms over his chest, and murmured: "You are very frank, sir. Unfortunately for me, I'm only a poor devil, as I've already told you. My name is May, and I earn my living by speaking to the public and turning a compliment."

"I am forced to yield to your decision," said the magistrate sadly. "The clerk will now read the minutes of your examination—listen."

While Goguet read the evidence aloud, the prisoner listened without making any remark, but when asked to sign the document, he obstinately refused to do so, fearing, he said, "some hidden treachery."

A moment afterward the soldiers who had escorted him to the magistrate's room conducted him back to the Depot.

XIII

WHEN the prisoner had gone, M. Segmuller sank back in his armchair, literally exhausted. He was in that state of nervous prostration which so often follows protracted but fruitless efforts. He had scarcely strength enough to bathe his burning forehead and gleaming eyes with cool, refreshing water.

This frightful examination had lasted no less than seven consecutive hours.

The smiling clerk, who had kept his place at his desk busily writing the whole while, now rose to his feet, glad of an opportunity to stretch his limbs and snap his fingers, cramped by holding the pen. Still, he was not in the least degree bored. He invariably took a semi-theatrical interest in the dramas that were daily enacted in his presence; his excitement being all the greater owing to the uncertainty that shrouded the finish of the final act—a finish that only too often belied the ordinary rules and deductions of writers for the stage.

"What a knave!" he exclaimed after vainly waiting for the magistrate or the detective to express an opinion, "what a rascal!"

M. Segmuller ordinarily put considerable confidence in his clerk's long experience. He sometimes even went so far as to consult him, doubtless somewhat in the same style that Moliere consulted his servant. But, on this occasion he did not accept his opinion.

"No," said he in a thoughtful tone, "that man is not a knave. When I spoke to him kindly he was really touched; he wept, he hesitated. I could have sworn that he was about to tell me everything."

"Ah, he's a man of wonderful power!" observed Lecoq.

The detective was sincere in his praise. Although the prisoner had disappointed his plans, and had even insulted him, he could not help admiring his shrewdness and courage. He—Lecoq—had prepared himself for a strenuous struggle with this man, and he hoped to conquer in the end. Nevertheless in his secret soul he felt for his adversary, admiring that sympathy which a "foeman worthy of one's steel" always inspires.

"What coolness, what courage!" continued the young detective. "Ah! there's no denying it, his system of defense—of absolute denial—is a masterpiece. It is perfect. How well he played that difficult part of buffoon! At times I could scarcely restrain my admiration. What is a famous comedian beside that fellow? The greatest actors need the adjunct of stage scenery to support the illusion, whereas this man, entirely unaided, almost convinced me even against my reason."

"Do you know what your very appropriate criticism proves?" inquired the magistrate.

"I am listening, sir."

"Ah, well! I have arrived at this conclusion—either this man is really May, the stroller, earning his living by paying compliments, as he says—or else he belongs to the highest rank of society, and not to the middle classes. It is only in the lowest or in the highest ranks that you encounter such grim energy as he has displayed, such scorn of life, as well as such remarkable presence of mind and resolution. A vulgar tradesman attracted to the Poivriere by some shameful passion would have confessed it long ago."

"But, sir, this man is surely not the buffoon, May," replied the young detective.

"No, certainly not," responded M. Segmuller; "we must, therefore, decide upon some plan of action." He smiled kindly, and added, in a friendly voice: "It was unnecessary to tell you that, Monsieur Lecoq. Quite unnecessary, since to you belongs the honor of having detected this fraud. As for myself, I confess, that if I had not been warned in advance, I should have been the dupe of this clever artist's talent."

The young detective bowed; a blush of modesty tinged his cheeks, but a gleam of pleased vanity sparkled in his eyes. What a difference between this friendly, benevolent magistrate and M. d'Escorval, so taciturn and haughty. This man, at least, understood, appreciated, and encouraged him; and it was with a common theory and an equal ardor that they were about to devote themselves to a search for the truth. Scarcely had Lecoq allowed these thoughts to flit across his mind than he reflected that his satisfaction was, after all, a trifle premature, and that success was still extremely doubtful. With this chilling conclusion, presence of mind returned. Turning toward the magistrate, he exclaimed: "You will recollect, sir, that the Widow Chupin mentioned a son of hers, a certain Polyte—"

"Yes."

"Why not question him? He must know all the frequenters of the Poivriere, and might perhaps give us valuable information regarding Gustave, Lacheneur, and the murderer himself. As he is not in solitary confinement, he has probably heard of his mother's arrest; but it seems to me impossible that he should suspect our present perplexity."

"Ah! you are a hundred times right!" exclaimed the magistrate. I ought to have thought of that myself. In his position he can scarcely have been tampered with as yet, and I'll have him up here to-morrow morning; I will also question his wife."

Turning to his clerk, M. Segmuller added: "Quick, Goguet, prepare a summons in the name of the wife of Hippolyte Chupin, and address an order to the governor of the Depot to produce her husband!"

But night was coming on. It was already too dark to see to write, and accordingly the clerk rang the bell for lights. Just as the messenger who brought the lamps turned to leave the room, a rap was heard at the door. Immediately afterward the governor of the Depot entered.

During the past twenty-four hours this worthy functionary had been greatly perplexed concerning the mysterious prisoner he had placed in secret cell No. 3, and he now came to the magistrate for advice regarding him. "I come to ask," said he, "if I am still to retain the prisoner May in solitary confinement?"

"Yes."

"Although I fear fresh attacks of frenzy, I dislike to confine him in the strait-jacket again."

"Leave him free in his cell," replied M. Segmuller; "and tell the keepers to watch him well, but to treat him kindly."

By the provisions of Article 613 of the Code, accused parties are placed in the custody of the government, but the investigating magistrate is allowed to adopt such measures concerning them as he may deem necessary for the interest of the prosecution.

The governor bowed assent to M. Segmuller's instructions, and then added: "You have doubtless succeeded in establishing the prisoner's identity."

"Unfortunately, I have not."

The governor shook his head with a knowing air. "In that case," said he, "my conjectures were correct. It seems to me evident that this man is a criminal of the worst description—an old offender certainly, and one who has the strongest interest in concealing his identity. You will find that you have to deal with a man who has been sentenced to the galleys for life, and who has managed to escape from Cayenne."

"Perhaps you are mistaken."

"Hum! I shall be greatly surprised if such should prove the case. I must admit that my opinion in this matter is identical with that of M. Gevrol, the most experienced and the most skilful of our inspectors. I agree with him in thinking that young detectives are often overzealous, and run after fantoms originated in their own brains."

Lecoq, crimson with wrath, was about to make an angry response when M. Segmuller motioned to him to remain silent. Then with a smile on his face the magistrate replied to the governor. "Upon my word, my dear friend," he said, "the more I study this affair, the more convinced I am of the correctness of the theory advanced by the 'overzealous' detective. But, after all, I am not infallible, and I shall depend upon your counsel and assistance."

"Oh! I have means of verifying my assertion," interrupted the governor; "and I hope before the end of the next twenty-four hours that our man will have been identified, either by the police or by one of his fellow-prisoners."

With these words he took his leave. Scarcely had he done so than Lecoq sprang to his feet. The young detective was furious. "You see that Gevrol already speaks ill of me; he is jealous."

"Ah, well! what does that matter to you? If you succeed, you will have your revenge. If you are mistaken—then I am mistaken, too."

Then, as it was already late, M. Segmuller confided to Lecoq's keeping the various articles the latter had accumulated in support of his theory. He also placed in his hands the diamond earring, the owner of which must be discovered; and the letter signed "Lacheneur," which had been found in the pocket of the spurious soldier. Having given him full instructions, he asked him to make his appearance promptly on the morrow, and then dismissed him, saying: "Now go; and may good luck attend you!"

XIV

LONG, narrow, and low of ceiling, having on the one side a row of windows looking on to a small courtyard, and on the other a range of doors, each with a number on its central panel, thus reminding one of some corridor in a second-rate hotel, such is the Galerie d'Instruction at the Palais de Justice whereby admittance is gained into the various rooms occupied by the

investigating magistrates. Even in the daytime, when it is thronged with prisoners, witnesses, and guards, it is a sad and gloomy place. But it is absolutely sinister of aspect at nighttime, when deserted, and only dimly lighted by the smoky lamp of a solitary attendant, waiting for the departure of some magistrate whom business has detained later than usual.

Although Lecoq was not sensitive to such influences, he made haste to reach the staircase and thus escape the echo of his footsteps, which sounded most drearily in the silence and darkness pervading the gallery.

Finding an open window on the floor below, he looked out to ascertain the state of the weather. The temperature was much milder; the snow had altogether disappeared, and the pavement was almost dry. A slight haze, illumined by the ruddy glare of the street lamps, hung like a purple mantle over the city. The streets below were full of animation; vehicles were rolling rapidly to and fro, and the footways were too narrow for the bustling crowd, which, now that the labors of the day were ended, was hastening homeward or in search of pleasure.

The sight drew a sigh from the young detective. "And it is in this great city," he murmured, "in the midst of this world of people that I must discover the traces of a person I don't even know! Is it possible to accomplish such a feat?"

The feeling of despondency that had momentarily surprised him was not, however, of long duration. "Yes, it is possible," cried an inward voice. "Besides, it *must* be done; your future depends upon it. Where there's a will, there's a way." Ten seconds later he was in the street, more than ever inflamed with hope and courage.

Unfortunately, however, man can only place organs of limited power at the disposal of his boundless desires; and Lecoq had not taken twenty steps along the streets before he became aware that if the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. His limbs trembled, and his head whirled. Nature was asserting her rights; during the last forty-eight hours, the young detective had taken scarcely a moment's rest, and he had, moreover, now passed an entire day without food.

"Am I going to be ill?" he thought, sinking on to a bench. And he groaned inwardly on recapitulating all that he wished to do that evening.

If he dealt only with the more important matters, must he

not at once ascertain the result of Father Absinthe's search after the man who had recognized one of the victims at the Morgue; test the prisoner's assertions regarding the box of clothes left at one of the hotels surrounding the Northern Railway Station; and last, but not the least, must he not procure the address of Polyte Chupin's wife, in order to serve her with the summons to appear before M. Segmuller?

Under the power of urgent necessity, he succeeded in triumphing over his attack of weakness, and rose, murmuring: "I will go first to the Prefecture and to the Morgue; then I will see."

But he did not find Father Absinthe at the Prefecture, and no one could give any tidings of him. He had not been there at all during the day. Nor could any one indicate, even vaguely, the abode of the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law.

On the other hand, however, Lecoq met a number of his colleagues, who laughed and jeered at him unmercifully. "Ah! you are a shrewd fellow!" they said, "it seems that you have just made a wonderful discovery, and it's said you are going to be decorated with the Legion of Honor."

Gevrol's influence betrayed itself everywhere. The jealous inspector had taken pains to inform all his colleagues and subordinates that poor Lecoq, crazed by ambition, persisted in declaring that a low, vulgar murderer trying to escape justice was some great personage in disguise. However, the jeers and taunts of which Lecoq was the object had but little effect upon him, and he consoled himself with the reflection that, "He laughs best who laughs last."

If he were restless and anxious as he walked along the Quai des Orfevres, it was because he could not explain Father Absinthe's prolonged absence, and because he feared that Gevrol, mad with jealousy, might attempt, in some underhand way, to frustrate his, Lecoq's, efforts to arrive at a solution of the mystery.

At the Morgue the young detective met with no better success than at the Prefecture. After ringing three or four times, one of the keepers opened the door and informed him that the bodies had not been identified, and that the old police agent had not been seen since he went away early in the morning.

"This is a bad beginning," thought Lecoq. "I will go and get some dinner—that, perhaps, will change the luck; at all

events, I have certainly earned the bottle of good wine to which I intend to treat myself."

It was a happy thought. A hearty meal washed down with a couple of glasses of Bordeaux sent new courage and energy coursing through his veins. If he still felt a trifle weary, the sensation of fatigue was at all events greatly diminished when he left the restaurant with a cigar between his lips.

Just at that moment he longed for Father Papillon's trap and sturdy steed. Fortunately, a cab was passing: he hired it, and as eight o'clock was striking, alighted at the corner of the square in front of the Northern Railway Station. After a brief glance round, he began his search for the hotel where the murderer pretended to have left a box of clothes.

It must be understood that he did not present himself in his official capacity. Hotel proprietors fight shy of detectives, and Lecoq was aware that if he proclaimed his calling he would probably learn nothing at all. By brushing back his hair and turning up his coat collar, he made, however, a very considerable alteration in his appearance; and it was with a marked English accent that he asked the landlords and servants of various hostelries surrounding the station for information concerning a "foreign workman named May."

He conducted his search with considerable address, but everywhere he received the same reply.

"We don't know such a person; we haven't seen any one answering the description you give of him."

Any other answer would have astonished Lecoq, so strongly persuaded was he that the prisoner had only mentioned the circumstances of a trunk left at one of these hotels in order to give a semblance of truth to his narrative. Nevertheless he continued his investigation. If he noted down in his memorandum book the names of all the hotels which he visited, it was with a view of making sure of the prisoner's discomfiture when he was conducted to the neighborhood and asked to prove the truth of his story.

Eventually, Lecoq reached the Hotel de Mariembourg, at the corner of the Rue St. Quentin. The house was of modest proportions; but seemed respectable and well kept. Lecoq pushed open the glass door leading into the vestibule, and entered the office—a neat, brightly lighted room, where he found a woman standing upon a chair, her face on a level with a large bird cage, covered with a piece of black silk. She was repeating

three or four German words with great earnestness to the inmate of the cage, and was so engrossed in this occupation that Lecoq had to make considerable noise before he could attract her attention.

At length she turned her head, and the young detective exclaimed: "Ah! good evening, madame; you are much interested, I see, in teaching your parrot to talk."

"It isn't a parrot," replied the woman, who had not yet descended from her perch; "but a starling, and I am trying to teach it to say 'Have you breakfasted?' in German."

"What! can starlings talk?"

"Yes, sir, as well as you or I," rejoined the woman, jumping down from the chair.

Just then the bird, as if it had understood the question, cried very distinctly: "Camille! Where is Camille?"

But Lecoq was too preoccupied to pay any further attention to the incident. "Madame," he began, "I wish to speak to the proprietor of this hotel."

"I am the proprietor."

"Oh! very well. I was expecting a mechanic—from Leipsic—to meet me here in Paris. To my great surprise, he has not made his appearance; and I came to inquire if he was stopping here. His name is May."

"May!" repeated the hostess, thoughtfully. "May!"

"He ought to have arrived last Sunday evening."

The woman's face brightened. "Wait a moment," said she. "Was this friend of yours a middle-aged man, of medium size, of very dark complexion—wearing a full beard, and having very bright eyes?"

Lecoq could scarcely conceal his agitation. This was an exact description of the supposed murderer. "Yes," he stammered, "that is a very good portrait of the man."

"Ah, well! he came here on Shrove Sunday, in the afternoon. He asked for a cheap room, and I showed him one on the fifth floor. The office-boy was not here at the time, and he insisted upon taking his trunk upstairs himself. I offered him some refreshments; but he declined to take anything, saying that he was in a great hurry; and he went away after giving me ten francs as security for the rent."

"Where is he now?" inquired the young detective.

"Dear me! that reminds me," replied the woman. "He has never returned, and I have been rather anxious about him.

Paris is such a dangerous place for strangers! It is true he spoke French as well as you or I; but what of that? Yesterday evening I gave orders that the commissary of police should be informed of the matter."

"Yesterday—the commissary?"

"Yes. Still, I don't know whether the boy obeyed me. I had forgotten all about it. Allow me to ring for the boy, and ask him."

A bucket of iced water falling upon Lecoq's head could not have astonished him more than did this announcement from the proprietress of the Hotel de Mariembourg. Had the prisoner indeed told the truth? Was it possible? Gevrol and the governor of the prison were right, then, and M. Segmuller and he, Lecoq, were senseless fools, pursuing a fantom. These ideas flashed rapidly through the young detective's brain. But he had no time for reflection. The boy who had been summoned now made his appearance, and proved to be a big overgrown lad with frank, chubby face.

"Fritz," asked his mistress, "did you go to the commissary's office?"

"Yes, madame."

"What did he say?"

"He was not in; but I spoke to his secretary, M. Casimir, who said you were not to worry yourself, as the man would no doubt return."

"But he has not returned."

The boy rejoined, with a movement of the shoulders that plainly implied: "How can I help that?"

"You hear, sir," said the hostess, apparently thinking the importunate questioner would now withdraw.

Such, however, was not Lecoq's intention, and he did not even move, though he had need of all his self-possession to retain his English accent. "This is very annoying," said he, "very! I am even more anxious and undecided than I was before, since I am not certain that this is the man I am seeking for."

"Unfortunately, sir, I can tell you nothing more," calmly replied the landlady.

Lecoq reflected for a moment, knitting his brows and biting his lips, as if he were trying to discover some means of solving the mystery. In point of fact, he was seeking for some adroit phrase which might lead this woman to show him the register

in which all travelers are compelled to inscribe their full names, profession, and usual residence. At the same time, however, it was necessary that he should not arouse her suspicions.

"But, madame," said he at last, "can't you remember the name this man gave you? Was it May? Try to recollect if that was the name—May—May!"

"Ah! I have so many things to remember. But now I think of it, and the name must be entered in my book, which, if it would oblige you, I can show you. It is in the drawer of my writing-table. Whatever can I have done with my keys?"

And while the hostess, who seemed to possess about as much intelligence as her starling, was turning the whole office upside down looking for her keys, Lecoq scrutinized her closely. She was about forty years of age, with an abundance of light hair, and a very fair complexion. She was well preserved—that is to say, she was plump and healthy in appearance; her glance was frank and unembarrassed; her voice was clear and musical, and her manners were pleasing, and entirely free from affectation.

"Ah!" she eventually exclaimed, "I have found those wretched keys at last." So saying, she opened her desk, took out the register, laid it on the table, and began turning over the leaves. At last she found the desired page.

"Sunday, February 20th," said she. "Look, sir: here on the seventh line—May—no Christian name—foreign artist—coming from Leipsic—without papers."

While Lecoq was examining this record with a dazed air, the woman exclaimed: "Ah! now I can explain how it happened that I forgot the man's name and strange profession—'foreign artist.' I did not make the entry myself."

"Who made it, then?"

"The man himself, while I was finding ten francs to give him as change for the louis he handed me. You can see that the writing is not at all like that of other entries."

Lecoq had already noted this circumstance, which seemed to furnish an irrefutable argument in favor of the assertions made by the landlady and the prisoner. "Are you sure," he asked, "that this is the man's handwriting?"

In his anxiety he had forgotten his English accent. The woman noticed this at once, for she drew back, and cast a suspicious glance at the pretended foreigner. "I know what I am saying," she said, indignantly. "And now this is enough, isn't it?"

Knowing that he had betrayed himself, and thoroughly ashamed of his lack of coolness, Lecoq renounced his English accent altogether. "Excuse me," he said, "if I ask one more question. Have you this man's trunk in your possession?"

"Certainly."

"You would do me an immense service by showing it to me."

"Show it to you!" exclaimed the landlady, angrily. "What do you take me for? What do you want? and who are you?"

"You shall know in half an hour," replied the young detective, realizing that further persuasion would be useless.

He hastily left the room, ran to the Place de Roubaix, jumped into a cab, and giving the driver the address of the district commissary of police, promised him a hundred sous over and above the regular fare if he would only make haste. As might have been expected under such circumstances, the poor horse fairly flew over the ground.

Lecoq was fortunate enough to find the commissary at his office. Having given his name, he was immediately ushered into the magistrate's presence and told his story in a few words.

"It is really true that they came to inform me of this man's disappearance," said the commissary. "Casimir told me about it this morning."

"They—came—to inform—you—" faltered Lecoq.

"Yes, yesterday; but I have had so much to occupy my time. Now, my man, how can I serve you?"

"Come with me, sir; compel them to show us the trunk, and send for a locksmith to open it. Here is the authority—a search warrant given me by the investigating magistrate to use in case of necessity. Let us lose no time. I have a cab at the door."

"We will start at once," said the commissary.

The driver whipped up his horse once more, and they were soon rapidly rolling in the direction of the Rue St. Quentin.

"Now, sir," said the young detective, "permit me to ask if you know this woman who keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg?"

"Yes, indeed, I know her very well. When I was first appointed to this district, six years ago, I was a bachelor, and for a long while I took my meals at her table d'hote. Casimir, my secretary, boards there even now."

"And what kind of woman is she?"

"Why, upon my word, my young friend, Madame Milner—for such is her name—is a very respectable widow (highly esteemed by her neighbors) and having a very prosperous busi-

ness. If she remains a widow, it is only from choice, for she is very prepossessing and has plenty of suitors."

"Then you don't think her capable of serving, for the sake of a good round sum, the interests of some wealthy culprit?"

"Have you gone mad?" interrupted the commissary. "What, Madame Milner perjure herself for the sake of money! Haven't I just told you that she is an honest woman, and that she is very well off! Besides, she informed me yesterday that this man was missing, so—"

Lecoq made no reply; the driver was pulling up; they had reached their destination.

On seeing her obstinate questioner reappear, accompanied by the commissary, Madame Milner seemed to understand everything.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "a detective! I might have guessed it? Some crime has been committed; and now my hotel has lost its reputation forever!"

While a messenger was despatched for a locksmith, the commissary endeavored to reassure and console her, a task of no little difficulty, and which he was some time in accomplishing.

At last they all went up to the missing man's room, and Lecoq sprang toward the trunk. Ah! there was no denying it. It had, indeed, come from Leipsic; as the labels pasted upon it by the different railroad companies only too plainly proved. On being opened, it was, moreover, found to contain the various articles mentioned by the prisoner.

Lecoq was thunderstruck. When he had seen the commissary lock the trunk and its contents up in a cupboard and take possession of the key, he felt he could endure nothing more. He left the room with downcast head; and stumbled like a drunken man as he went down the stairs.

XV

MARDI GRAS, or Shrove Tuesday, was very gay that year; that is to say, all places of public resort were crowded. When Lecoq left the Hotel de Mariembourg about midnight, the

streets were as full as if it had been noonday, and the cafés were thronged with customers.

But the young detective had no heart for pleasure. He mingled with the crowd without seemingly seeing it, and jostled against groups of people chatting at the corners, without hearing the imprecations occasioned by his awkwardness. Where was he going? He had no idea. He walked aimlessly, more disconsolate and desperate than the gambler who had staked his last hope with his last louis, and lost.

"I must yield," he murmured; "this evidence is conclusive. My presumptions were only chimeras; my deductions the playthings of chance! All I can now do is to withdraw, with the least possible damage and ridicule, from the false position I have assumed."

Just as he reached the boulevard, however, a new idea entered his brain, an idea of so startling a kind that he could scarcely restrain a loud exclamation of surprise. "What a fool I am!" cried he, striking his hand violently against his forehead. "Is it possible to be so strong in theory, and yet so ridiculously weak in practise? Ah! I am only a child, a mere novice, disheartened by the slightest obstacle. I meet with a difficulty, and at once I lose all my courage. Now, let me reflect calmly. What did I tell the judge about this murderer, whose plan of defense so puzzles us? Did I not tell him that we had to deal with a man of superior talent—with a man of consummate penetration and experience—a bold, courageous fellow of imperturbable coolness, who will do anything to insure the success of his plans? Yes; I told him all that, and yet I give up the game in despair as soon as I meet with a single circumstance that I can not instantly explain. It is evident that such a prisoner would not resort to old, hackneyed, commonplace expedients. Time, patience, and research are requisite to find a flaw in his defense. With such a man as he is, the more appearances are against my presumptions, and in favor of his narrative, the more certain it is that I am right —or else logic is no longer logic."

At this thought, Lecoq burst into a hearty laugh. "Still," continued he, "it would perhaps be premature to expose this theory at headquarters in Gevrol's presence. He would at once present me with a crtificate for admission into some lunatic asylum."

The young detective paused. While absorbed in thought,

his legs, obeying an instinctive impulse, had brought him to his lodgings. He rang the bell; the door opened, and he groped his way slowly up to the fourth floor. He had reached his room, and was about to enter, when some one, whom he could not distinguish in the dark, called out: "Is that you, Monsieur Lecoq?"

"Yes, it's I!" replied the young man, somewhat surprised; "but who are you?"

"I'm Father Absinthe."

"Oh! indeed! Well, you are welcome! I didn't recognize your voice—will you come in?"

They entered the room, and Lecoq lit a candle. Then the young man could see his colleague, and, good heavens! he found him in a most pitiable condition.

He was as dirty and as bespattered with mud as a lost dog that has been wandering about in the rain and the mire for a week at the very least. His overcoat bore the traces of frequent contact with damp walls; his hat had lost its form entirely. His eyes wore an anxious look, and his mustache drooped despondently. He spoke, moreover, so strangely that one might have supposed his mouth was full of sand.

"Do you bring me bad news?" inquired Lecoq, after a short examination of his companion.

"Yes, bad."

"The people you were following escaped you, then?"

The old man nodded his head affirmatively.

"It is unfortunate—very unfortunate!" said Lecoq. "But it is useless to distress ourselves about it. Don't be so cast down, Father Absinthe. To-morrow, between us, we will repair the damage."

This friendly encouragement only increased the old man's evident embarrassment. He blushed, this veteran, as if he had been a schoolgirl, and raising his hands toward heaven, he exclaimed: "Ah, you wretch! didn't I tell you so?"

"Why! what is the matter with you?" inquired Lecoq.

Father Absinthe made no reply. Approaching a looking-glass that hung against the wall, he surveyed himself reproachfully and began to heap cruel insults upon the reflection of his features.

"You old good-for-nothing!" he exclaimed. "You vile deserter! have you no shame left? You were entrusted with a mission, were you not? And how have you fulfilled it? You

have got drunk, you old wretch, so drunk as to have lost your wits. Ah, you shan't escape punishment this time, for even if M. Lecoq is indulgent, you shan't taste another drop for a week. Yes, you old sot, you shall suffer for this escapade."

"Come, come," said Lecoq, "you can sermonize by and by. Now tell me your story."

"Ah! I am not proud of it, believe me. However, never mind. No doubt you received the letter in which I told you I was going to follow the young men who seemed to recognize Gustave?"

"Yes, yes—go on!"

"Well, as soon as they entered the café, into which I had followed them, they began drinking, probably to drive away their emotion. After that they apparently felt hungry. At all events they ordered breakfast. I followed their example. The mail, with coffee and beer afterward, took up no little time, and indeed a couple of hours had elapsed before they were ready to pay their bill and go. Good! I supposed they would now return home. Not at all. They walked down the Rue Dauphin; and I saw them enter another café. Five minutes later I glided in after them; and found them already engaged in a game of billiards."

At this point Father Absinthe hesitated; it is no easy task to recount one's blunders to the very person who has suffered by them.

"I seated myself at a little table," he eventually resumed, "and asked for a newspaper. I was reading with one eye and watching with the other, when a respectable-looking man entered, and took a seat beside me. As soon as he had seated himself he asked me to let him have the paper when I had finished with it. I handed it to him, and then we began talking about the weather. At last he proposed a game of bezique. I declined, but we afterward compromised the matter by having a game of piquet. The young men, you understand, were still knocking the balls about. We began by playing for a glass of brandy each. I won. My adversary asked for his revenge, and we played two games more. I still kept on winning. He insisted upon another game, and again I won, and still I drank—and drank again—"

"Go on, go on."

"Ah! here's the rub. After that I remember nothing—nothing either about the man I had been playing with or the young

men. It seems to me, however, that I recollect falling asleep in the café, and that a long while afterward a waiter came and woke me and told me to go. Then I must have wandered about along the quays until I came to my senses, and decided to go to your lodgings and wait on the stairs until you returned."

To Father Absinthe's great surprise, Lecoq seemed rather thoughtful than angry. "What do you think about this chance acquaintance of yours, papa?" asked the young detective.

"I think he was following me while I was following the others, and that he entered the café with the view of making me drunk."

"What was he like?"

"Oh, he was a tall, stoutish man, with a broad, red face, and a flat nose; and he was very unpretending and affable in manner.

"It was he!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"He! Who?"

"Why, the accomplice—the man whose footprints we discovered—the pretended drunkard—a devil incarnate, who will get the best of us yet, if we don't keep our eyes open. Don't you forget him, papa; and if you ever meet him again—"

But Father Absinthe's confession was not ended. Like most devotees, he had reserved the worst sin for the last.

"But that's not all," he resumed; "and as it's best to make a clean breast of it, I will tell you that it seems to me this traitor talked about the affair at the Poivriere, and that I told him all we had discovered, and all we intended to do."

Lecoq made such a threatening gesture that the old tippler drew back in consternation. "You wretched man!" exclaimed the young detective, "to betray our plans to the enemy!"

But his calmness soon returned. If at first sight the evil seemed to be beyond remedy, on further thought it had a good side after all. It sufficed to dispel all the doubts that had assailed Lecoq's mind after his visit to the Hotel de Mariembourg.

"However," quoth our hero, "this is not the time for deliberation. I am overcome with fatigue; take a mattress from the bed for yourself, my friend, and let us get a little sleep."

Lecoq was a man of considerable forethought. Hence, before going to bed he took good care to wind up his alarm so that it might wake him at six o'clock. "With that to warn us," he remarked to his companion, as he blew out the candle, "there need be no fear of our missing the coach."

He had not, however, made allowance for his own extreme weariness or for the soporific effect of the alcoholic fumes with which his comrade's breath was redolent. When six o'clock struck at the church of St. Eustache, the young detective's alarm resounded faithfully enough, with a loud and protracted whir. Shrill and sonorous as was the sound, it failed, however, to break the heavy sleep of the two detectives. They would indeed, in all probability, have continued slumbering for several hours longer, if at half-past seven a sturdy fist had not begun to rap loudly at the door. With one bound Lecoq was out of bed, amazed at seeing the bright sunlight, and furious at the futility of his precautions.

"Come in!" he cried to his early visitor. He had no enemies to fear, and could, without danger, sleep with his door unlocked.

In response to his call, Father Papillon's shrewd face peered into the room.

"Ah! it is my worthy coachman!" exclaimed Lecoq. "Is there anything new?"

"Excuse me, but it's the old affair that brings me here," replied our eccentric friend the cabman. "You know—the thirty francs those wretched women paid me. Really, I shan't sleep in peace till you have worked off the amount by using my vehicle. Our drive yesterday lasted two hours and a half, which, according to the regular fare, would be worth a hundred sous; so you see I've still more than twelve hours at your disposal."

"That is all nonsense, my friend!"

"Possibly, but I am responsible for it, and if you won't use my cab, I've sworn to spend those twelve hours waiting outside your door. So now make up your mind." He gazed at Lecoq beseechingly, and it was evident that a refusal would wound him keenly.

"Very well," replied Lecoq, "I will take you for the morning, only I ought to warn you that we are starting on a long journey."

"Oh, Cocotte's legs may be relied upon."

"My companion and myself have business in your own neighborhood. It is absolutely necessary for us to find the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law; and I hope we shall be able to obtain her address from the police commissary of the district where the Poivriere is situated."

"Very well, we will go wherever you wish; I am at your orders."

A few moments later they were on their way.

Papillon's features wore an air of self-satisfied pride as, sitting erect on his box, he cracked his whip, and encouraged the nimble Cocotte. The vehicle could not have got over the ground more rapidly if its driver had been promised a hundred sous' gratuity.

Father Absinthe alone was sad. He had been forgiven by Lecoq, but he could not forget that he, an old police agent, had been duped as easily as if he had been some ignorant provincial. The thought was humiliating, and then in addition he had been fool enough to reveal the secret plans of the prosecution! He knew but too well that this act of folly had doubled the difficulties of Lecoq's task.

The long drive in Father Papillon's cab was not a fruitless one. The secretary of the commissary of police for the thirteenth arrondissement informed Lecoq that Polyte Chupin's wife lived with her child, in the suburbs, in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles. He could not indicate the precise number, but he described the house and gave them some information concerning its occupants.

The Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law, a native of Auvergne, had been bitterly punished for preferring a rakish Parisian ragamuffin to one of the grimy charcoal-burners of the Puy de Dome. She was hardly more than twelve years of age when she first came to Paris and obtained employment in a large factory. After ten years' privation and constant toil, she had managed to amass, sou by sou, the sum of three thousand francs. Then her evil genius threw Polyte Chupin across her path. She fell in love with this dissipated, selfish rascal; and he married her for the sake of her little hoard.

As long as the money lasted, that is, for some three or four months, matters went on pleasantly enough. But as soon as the last franc had been spent, Polyte left his wife, and complacently resumed his former life of idleness, thieving, and debauchery. When at times he returned home, it was merely with the view of robbing his wife of what little money she might have saved in the mean while; and periodically she uncomplainingly allowed him to despoil her of the last penny of her earnings.

Horrible to relate, this unworthy rascal even tried to trade

on her good looks. Here, however, he met with a strenuous resistance—a resistance which excited not merely his own ire, but also the hatred of the villain's mother—that old hag, the Widow Chupin. The result was that Polyte's wife was subjected to such incessant cruelty and persecution that one night she was forced to fly with only the rags that covered her. The Chupins —mother and son—believed, perhaps, that starvation would effect what their horrible threats and insidious counsel had failed to accomplish. Their shameful expectations were not, however, gratified.

In mentioning these facts to Lecoq, the commissary's secretary added that they had become widely known, and that the unfortunate creature's force of character had won for her general respect. Among those she frequented, moreover, she was known by the nickname of "Toinon the Virtuous"—a rather vulgar but, at all events, sincere tribute to her worth.

Grateful for this information, Lecoq returned to the cab. The Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, whither Papillon was now directed to drive, proved to be very unlike the Boulevard Malesherbes, and one brief glance sufficed to show that opulence had not here fixed its abode. Luck seemed for the moment to have turned in Lecoq's favor. At all events, when he and Father Absinthe alighted at the corner of the street, it so happened that the very first person the young detective questioned concerning the virtuous Toinon was well acquainted with her whereabouts. The house in which she resided was pointed out, and Lecoq was instructed to go upstairs to the top floor, and knock at the door in front of him. With such precise directions the two detectives speedily reached Madame Polyte Chupin's abode.

This proved to be a cold and gloomy attic of medium size, windowless, but provided with a small skylight. A straw pallet, a broken table, two chairs, and a few plain kitchen utensils constituted the sole appointments of this miserable garret. But in spite of the occupant's evident poverty, everything was neat and clean, and to use a forcible expression that fell from Father Absinthe, one could have eaten off the floor.

The two detectives entered, and found a woman busily engaged in making a heavy linen sack. She was seated in the centre of the room, directly under the skylight, so that the sun's rays might fall upon her work. At the sight of two strangers, she half rose from her chair, surprised, and perhaps a little

frightened; but when Lecoq had explained that they desired a few moments' conversation with her, she gave up her own seat, and drawing the second chair from a corner, invited both detectives to sit down. Lecoq complied, but Father Absinthe declared that he preferred to remain standing.

With a single glance Lecoq took an inventory of the humble abode, and, so to speak, appraised the woman. She was short, stout, and of commonplace appearance. Her forehead was extremely low, being crowned by a forest of coarse, black hair; while the expression of her large, black eyes, set very close together, recalled the look of patient resignation one so often detects in ill-treated and neglected animals. Possibly, in former days, she might have possessed that fleeting attraction called the *beaute du diable;* but now she looked almost as old as her wretched mother-in-law. Sorrow and privation, excessive toil and ill-treatment, had imparted to her face a livid hue, reddening her eyes and stamping deep furrows round about her temples. Still, there was an attribute of native honesty about her which even the foul atmosphere in which she had been compelled to live had not sufficed to taint.

Her little boy furnished a striking contrast. He was pale and puny; his eyes gleamed with a phosphorescent brilliancy; and his hair was of a faded flaxen tint. One little circumstance attracted both detectives' attention. If the mother was attired in an old, thin, faded calico dress, the child was warmly clad in stout woolen material.

"Madame, you have doubtless heard of a dreadful crime, committed in your mother-in-law's establishment," began Lecoq in a soft voice.

"Alas! yes, sir," replied Toinon the Virtuous, quickly adding: "But my husband could not have been implicated in it, since he is in prison."

Did not this objection, forestalling, as it were, suspicion, betray the most horrible apprehensions?

"Yes, I am aware of that," replied Lecoq. "Polyte was arrested a fortnight ago—"

"Yes, and very unjustly, sir," replied the neglected wife. "He was led astray by his companions, wicked, desperate men. He is so weak when he has taken a glass of wine that they can do whatever they like with him. If he were only left to himself he would not harm a child. You have only to look at him—"

As she spoke, the virtuous Toinon turned her red and swollen

eyes to a miserable photograph hanging against the wall. This blotchy smudge portrayed an exceedingly ugly, dissipated-looking young man, afflicted with a terrible squint, and whose repulsive mouth was partially concealed by a faint mustache. This rake of the barrieres was Polyte Chupin. And yet despite his unprepossessing aspect there was no mistaking the fact that this unfortunate woman loved him—had always loved him; besides, he was her husband.

A moment's silence followed her indication of the portrait—an act which clearly revealed how deeply she worshiped her persecutor; and during this pause the attic door slowly and softly opened. Not of itself, however, for suddenly a man's head peered in. The intruder, whoever he was, instantly withdrew, uttering as he did so a low exclamation. The door was swiftly closed again; the key—which had been left on the outside—grated in the lock, and the occupants of the garret could hear hurried steps descending the stairs.

Lecoq was sitting with his back to the door, and could not, therefore, see the intruder's face. Quickly as he had turned, he had failed to see who it was: and yet he was far from being surprised at the incident. Intuition explained its meaning.

"That must have been the accomplice!" he cried.

Thanks to his position, Father Absinthe had seen the man's face. "Yes," said he, "yes, it was the same man who made me drink with him yesterday."

With a bound, both detectives threw themselves against the door, exhausting their strength in vain attempts to open it. It resisted all their efforts, for it was of solid oak, having been purchased by the landlord from some public building in process of demolition, and it was, moreover, furnished with a strong and massive fastening.

"Help us!" cried Father Absinthe to the woman, who stood petrified with astonishment; "give us a bar, a piece of iron, a nail—anything!"

The younger man was making frantic efforts to push back the bolt, or to force the lock from the wood. He was wild with rage. At last, having succeeded in forcing the door open, they dashed out in pursuit of their mysterious adversary. On reaching the street, they eagerly questioned the bystanders. Having described the man as best they could, they found two persons who had seen him enter the house of Toinon the Virtuous, and a third who had seen him as he left. Some children

who were playing in the middle of the street added that he had run off in the direction of the Rue du Moulin-des-Pres as fast as his legs could carry him. It was in this street, near the corner of the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, that Lecoq had left old Papillon waiting with the cab.

"Let us hasten there!" proposed Father Absinthe; "perhaps Papillon can give us some information."

But Lecoq shook his head despondingly. He would go no further. "It would be of no use," he said. "He had sufficient presence of mind to turn the key in the lock, and that saved him. He is at least ten minutes in advance of us, and we should never overtake him."

Father Absinthe could not restrain his anger. He looked upon this mysterious accomplice who had so cruelly duped him as a personal enemy, and he would willingly have given a month's pay to be able to lay his hand on his shoulder. Lecoq was quite as angry as his subordinate, and his vanity was likewise wounded; he felt, however, that coolness and deliberation were necessary.

"Yes," said he thoughtfully, "he's a shrewd and daring fellow—a perfect demon. He doesn't remain idle. If we are working, he's at work too. No matter what side I turn, I find him on the defensive. He foiled you, papa, in your effort to obtain a clue concerning Gustave's identity; and he made me appear a fool in arranging that little comedy at the Hotel de Mariembourg. His diligence has been wonderful. He has hitherto been in advance of us everywhere, and this fact explains the failures that have attended all my efforts. Here we arrive before him. But if he came here, it was because he scented danger. Hence, we may hope. Now let us get back and question Polyte's wife."

Alas! poor Toinon the Virtuous did not understand the affair at all. She had remained upstairs, holding her child by the hand, and leaning over the baluster; her mind in great perplexity and her eyes and ears on the alert. As soon as she perceived the two detectives coming up the stairs again, she hastened down to meet them. "In the name of heaven, what does this all mean?" she asked. "Whatever has happened?"

But Lecoq was not the man to tell his business on a landing, with inquisitive ears all around him, and before he answered Toinon he made her go up into her own garret, and securely close the door.

"We started in pursuit of a man who is implicated in the murders at the Poivriere," he said; "one who came here hoping to find you alone, who was frightened at seeing us."

"A murderer!" faltered Toinon, with clasped hands. "What could he want of me?"

"Who knows? It is very probable that he is one of your husband's friends."

"Oh! sir."

"Why, did you not tell me just now that Polyte had some very undesirable acquaintances? But don't be alarmed; this does not compromise him in the least. Besides, you can very easily clear him of all suspicion."

"How? In what way? Oh, tell me at once."

"Merely by answering me frankly, and by assisting me to find the guilty party. Now, among your husband's friends, don't you know any who might be capable of such a deed? Give me the names of his acquaintances."

The poor woman's hesitation was evident; undoubtedly she had been present at many sinister cabals, and had been threatened with terrible punishment if she dared to disclose the plans formed by Polyte or his associates.

"You have nothing to fear," said Lecoq, encouragingly, "and I promise you no one shall ever know that you have told me a word. Very probably you can tell me nothing more than I know already. I have heard a great deal about your former life, and the brutality with which Polyte and his mother have treated you."

"My husband has never treated me brutally," said the young woman, indignantly; "besides, that matter would only concern myself."

"And your mother-in-law?"

"She is, perhaps, a trifle quick-tempered; but in reality she has a good heart."

"Then, if you were so happy at the Widow Chupin's house, why did you fly from it?"

Toinon the Virtuous turned scarlet to the very roots of her hair. "I left for other reasons," she replied. "There were always a great many drunken men about the house; and, sometimes, when I was alone, some of them tried to carry their pleasantry too far. You may say that I have a solid fist of my own, and that I am quite capable of protecting myself. That's true. But while I was away one day some fellows were wicked

enough to make this child drink to such an excess that when I came home I found him as stiff and cold as if he were dead. It was necessary to fetch a doctor or else—"

She suddenly paused; her eyes dilated. From red she turned livid, and in a hoarse, unnatural voice, she cried: "Toto! wretched child!"

Lecoq looked behind him, and shuddered. He understood everything. This child—not yet five years old—had stolen up behind him, and, ferreting in the pockets of his overcoat, had rifled them of their contents.

"Ah, well—yes!" exclaimed the unfortunate mother, bursting into tears. "That's how it was. Directly the child was out of my sight, they used to take him into town. They took him into the crowded streets, and taught him to pick people's pockets, and bring them everything he could lay his hands on. If the child was detected they were angry with him and beat him; and if he succeeded they gave him a sou to buy some sweets, and kept what he had taken."

The luckless Toinon hid her face in her hands, and sobbed in an almost unintelligible voice: "Ah, I did not wish my little one to be a thief."

But what this poor creature did not tell was that the man who had led the child out into the streets, to teach him to steal, was his own father, and her husband—the ruffian, Polyte Chupin. The two detectives plainly understood, however, that such was the case, and the father's crime was so horrible, and the woman's grief so great, that, familiar as they were with all the phases of crime, their very hearts were touched. Lecoq's main thought, however, was to shorten this painful scene. The poor mother's emotion was a sufficient guarantee of her sincerity.

"Listen," said he, with affected harshness. "Two questions only, and then I will leave you. Was there a man named Gustave among the frequenters of the Poivriere?"

"No, sir, I'm quite sure there wasn't."

"Very well. But Lacheneur—you must know Lacheneur!"

"Yes, sir; I know him."

The young police agent could not repress an exclamation of delight. "At last," thought he, "I have a clue that may lead me to the truth. What kind of man is he?" he asked with intense anxiety.

"Oh! he is not at all like the other men who come to drink

at my mother-in-law's shop. I have only seen him once; but I remember him perfectly. It was on a Sunday. He was in a cab. He stopped at the corner of the waste ground and spoke to Polyte. When he went away, my husband said to me: 'Do you see that old man there? he will make all our fortunes.' I thought him a very respectable-looking gentleman—"

"That's enough," interrupted Lecoq. "Now it is necessary for you to tell the investigating magistrate all you know about him. I have a cab downstairs. Take your child with you, if you like; but make haste; come, come quickly!"

XVI

M. SEGMULLER was one of those magistrates whose profession is their only love, and who devote to its duties all the energy, intelligence, and sagacity they possess. As an investigator, he displayed, in his constant searches after truth, the same tenacity and zeal that distinguishes a conscientious physician struggling against some unknown disease, the same enthusiasm that is shown by the artist, enamored of the beautiful, who seeks to realize the ideal of art. Hence, it is easy to understand how greatly this mysterious case attracted and interested him. The magnitude of the crime, the peculiar circumstances attending it, the mystery that enshrouded the identity of both the victims and the murderer, the strange attitude the latter had assumed, everything combined to make a profound impression on his mind. Even the romantic element was not lacking in this strange case; being represented by the two women who had disappeared.

The extreme uncertainty of the result was another attraction for M. Segmuller's investigating mind. Given the magnitude of the difficulties that were to be overcome, he rightly considered that if his efforts proved successful, he would have achieved a really wonderful victory. And, assisted by such a man as Lecoq, who had a positive genius for his calling, and in whom he recognized a most valuable auxiliary, he really felt confident of ultimate success.

Even on returning home after the fatiguing labors of the day he did not think of freeing himself from the burden of responsibility in relation to the business he had on hand, or of driving away care until the morrow. He dined in haste, and as soon as he had swallowed his coffee began to study the case with renewed ardor. He had brought from his office a copy of the prisoner's narrative, which he attentively perused, not once or twice, but several times, seeking for some weak point that might be attacked with a probability of success. He analyzed every answer, and weighed one expression after another, striving, as he did so, to find some flaw through which he might slip a question calculated to shatter the structure of defense. He worked thus, far into the night, and yet he was on his legs again at an early hour in the morning. By eight o'clock he was not merely dressed and shaved, he had not merely taken his matutinal chocolate and arranged his papers, but he was actually on his way to the Palais de Justice. He had quite forgotten that his own impatience was not shared by others.

In point of fact, the Palais de Justice was scarcely awake when he arrived there. The doors had barely opened. The attendants were busy sweeping and dusting; or changing their ordinary garments for their official costumes. Some of them standing in the windows of the long dressing room were shaking and brushing the judges' and advocates' gowns; while in the great hall several clerks stood in a group, chaffing each other while waiting for the arrival of the head registrar and the opening of the investigation offices.

M. Segmuller thought that he had better begin by consulting the public prosecutor, but he discovered that this functionary had not yet arrived. Angry and impatient, he proceeded to his own office; and with his eyes fixed on the clock, growled at the slowness of the minute hand. Just after nine o'clock, Goguet, the smiling clerk, put in an appearance and speedily learned the kind of humor his master was in.

"Ah, you've come at last," gruffly ejaculated M. Segmuller, momentarily oblivious of the fact that he himself scarcely ever arrived before ten, and that a quarter-past nine was certainly early for his clerk.

Goguet's curiosity had indeed prompted him to hurry to the Palais; still, although well aware that he did not deserve a reprimand, he endeavored to mumble an excuse—an excuse cut short by M. Segmuller in such unusually harsh tones that

for once in a way Goguet's habitual smile faded from his face. "It's evident," thought he, "that the wind's blowing from a bad quarter this morning," with which reflection he philosophically put on his black sleeves and going to his table pretended to be absorbed in the task of mending his pens and preparing his paper.

In the mean while, M. Segmuller who was usually calmness personified, and dignity *par excellence,* paced restlessly to and fro. At times he would sit down and then suddenly spring to his feet again, gesticulating impatiently as he did so. Indeed, he seemed unable to remain quiet for a moment.

"The prosecution is evidently making no headway," thought the clerk. "May's prospects are encouraging." Owing to the magistrate's harsh reception the idea delighted him; and, indeed, letting his rancor have the upper hand, Goguet actually offered up a prayer that the prisoner might get the better of the fight.

From half-past nine till ten o'clock M. Segmuller rang for his messenger at least five times, and each time he asked him the same questions: "Are you sure that M. Lecoq has not been here this morning? Inquire! If he has not been here he must certainly have sent some one, or else have written to me."

Each time the astonished doorkeeper replied: "No one has been here, and there is no letter for you."

Five identical negative answers to the same inquiries only increased the magistrate's wrath and impatience. "It is inconceivable!" he exclaimed. "Here I am upon coals of fire, and that man dares to keep me waiting. Where can he be?"

At last he ordered a messenger to go and see if he could not find Lecoq somewhere in the neighborhood; perhaps in some restaurant or café. "At all events, he must be found and brought back immediately," said he.

When the man had started, M. Segmuller began to recover his composure. "We must not lose valuable time," he said to his clerk. "I was to examine the widow Chupin's son. I had better do so now. Go and tell them to bring him to me. Lecoq left the order at the prison."

In less than a quarter of an hour Polyte entered the room. From head to foot, from his lofty silk cap to his gaudy colored carpet slippers, he was indeed the original of the portrait upon which poor Toinon the Virtuous had lavished such loving glances. And yet the photograph was flattering. The lens

had failed to convey the expression of low cunning that distinguished the man's features, the impudence of his leering smile, and the mingled cowardice and ferocity of his eyes, which never looked another person in the face. Nor could the portrait depict the unwholesome, livid pallor of his skin, the restless blinking of his eyelids, and the constant movement of his thin lips as he drew them tightly over his short, sharp teeth. There was no mistaking his nature; one glance and he was estimated at his worth.

When he had answered the preliminary questions, telling the magistrate that he was thirty years of age, and that he had been born in Paris, he assumed a pretentious attitude and waited to see what else was coming.

But before proceeding with the real matter in hand, M. Segmuller wished to relieve the complacent scoundrel of some of his insulting assurance. Accordingly, he reminded Polyte, in forcible terms, that his sentence in the affair in which he was now implicated would depend very much upon his behavior and answers during the present examination.

Polyte listened with a nonchalant and even ironical air. In fact, this indirect threat scarcely touched him. Having previously made inquiries he had ascertained that he could not be condemned to more than six months' imprisonment for the offense for which he had been arrested; and what did a month more or less matter to him?

The magistrate, who read this thought in Polyte's eyes, cut his preamble short. "Justice," said he, "now requires some information from you concerning the frequenters of your mother's establishment."

"There are a great many of them, sir," answered Polyte in a harsh voice.

"Do you know one of them named Gustave?"

"No, sir."

To insist would probably awaken suspicion in Polyte's mind; accordingly, M. Segmuller continued: "You must, however, remember Lacheneur?"

"Lacheneur? No, this is the first time I've heard that name."

"Take care. The police have means of finding out a great many things."

The scapegrace did not flinch. "I am telling the truth, sir," he retorted. "What interest could I possibly have in deceiving you?"

Scarcely had he finished speaking than the door suddenly opened and Toinon the Virtuous entered the room, carrying her child in her arms. On perceiving her husband, she uttered a joyful exclamation, and sprang toward him. But Polyte, stepping back, gave her such a threatening glance that she remained rooted to the spot.

"It must be an enemy who pretends that I know any one named Lacheneur!" cried the barrière bully. "I should like to kill the person who uttered such a falsehood. Yes, kill him; I will never forgive it."

The messenger whom M. Segmuller had instructed to go in search of Lecoq was not at all displeased with the errand; for it enabled him to leave his post and take a pleasant little stroll through the neighborhood. He first of all proceeded to the Prefecture of Police, going the longest way round as a matter of course, but, on reaching his destination, he could find no one who had seen the young detective.

Accordingly, M. Segmuller's envoy retraced his steps, and leisurely sauntered through the restaurants, cafés, and wine shops installed in the vicinity of the Palais de Justice, and dependent on the customers it brought them. Being of a conscientious turn of mind, he entered each establishment in succession and meeting now and again various acquaintances, he felt compelled to proffer and accept numerous glasses of the favorite morning beverage—white wine. Turn which way he would, however, loiter as long as he might, there were still no signs of Lecoq. He was returning in haste, a trifle uneasy on account of the length of his absence, when he perceived a cab pull up in front of the Palais gateway. A second glance, and oh, great good fortune, he saw Lecoq, Father Absinthe, and the virtuous Toinon alight from this very vehicle. His peace of mind at once returned; and it was in a very important and somewhat husky tone that he delivered the order for Lecoq to follow him without a minute's delay. "M. Segmuller has asked for you a number of times," said he, "He has been extremely impatient, and he is in a very bad humor, so you may expect to have your head snapped off in the most expeditious manner."

Lecoq smiled as he went up the stairs. Was he not bringing with him the most potent of justifications? He thought of the agreeable surprise he had in store for the magistrate, and fancied he could picture the sudden brightening of that functionary's gloomy face.

And yet, fate so willed it that the doorkeeper's message and his urgent appeal that Lecoq should not loiter on the way, produced the most unfortunate results. Believing that M. Segmuller was anxiously waiting for him, Lecoq saw nothing wrong in opening the door of the magistrate's room without previously knocking; and being anxious to justify his absence, he yielded, moreover, to the impulse that led him to push forward the poor woman whose testimony might prove so decisive. When he saw, however, that the magistrate was not alone, and when he recognized Polyte Chupin—the original of the photograph—in the man M. Segmuller was examining, his stupefaction became intense. He instantly perceived his mistake and understood its consequences.

There was only one thing to be done: He must prevent any exchange of words between the two. Accordingly, springing toward Toinon and seizing her roughly by the arm, he ordered her to leave the room at once. But the poor creature was quite overcome, and trembled like a leaf. Her eyes were fixed upon her unworthy husband, and the happiness she felt at seeing him again shone plainly in her anxious gaze. Just for one second; and then she caught his withering glance and heard his words of menace. Terror-stricken, she staggered back, and then Lecoq seized her around the waist, and, lifting her with his strong arms, carried her out into the passage. The whole scene had been so brief that M. Segmuller was still forming the order for Toinon to be removed from the room, when he found the door closed again, and himself and Goguet alone with Polyte.

"Ah, ah!" thought the smiling clerk, in a flutter of delight, "this is something new." But as these little diversions never made him forget his duties, he leaned toward the magistrate and asked: "Shall I take down the last words the witness uttered?"

"Certainly," replied M. Segmuller, "and word for word, if you please."

He paused; the door opened again, this time to admit the magistrate's messenger, who timidly, and with a rather guilty air, handed his master a note, and then withdrew. This note, scribbled in pencil by Lecoq on a leaf torn from his memorandum book, gave the magistrate the name of the woman who had just entered his room, and recapitulated briefly but clearly the information obtained in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles.

"That young fellow thinks of everything!" murmured M.

Segmuller. The meaning of the scene that had just occurred was now explained to him. He understood everything.

He bitterly regretted this unfortunate meeting; at the same time casting the blame on his own impatience and lack of caution, which, as soon as the messenger had started in search of Lecoq, had induced him to summon Polyte Chupin. Although he could not conceal from himself the enormous influence this seemingly trivial incident might have, still he would not allow himself to be cast down, but prepared to resume his examination of Polyte Chupin in hopes of yet obtaining the information he desired.

"Let us proceed," he said to Polyte, who had not moved since his wife had been taken from the room, being to all appearances sublimely indifferent to everything passing around him. To the magistrate's proposal he carelessly nodded assent.

"Was that your wife who came in just now?" asked M. Segmuller.

"Yes."

"She wished to embrace you, and you repulsed her."

"I didn't repulse her."

"You kept her at a distance at all events. If you had a spark of affection in your nature, you would at least have looked at your child, which she held out to you. Why did you behave in that manner?"

"It wasn't the time for sentiment."

"You are not telling the truth. You simply desired to attract her attention, to influence her evidence."

"I—I influence her evidence! I don't understand you."

"But for that supposition, your words would have been meaningless?"

"What words?"

The magistrate turned to his clerk: "Goguet," said he, "read the last remark you took down."

In a monotonous voice, the smiling clerk repeated: "I should like to kill the person who dared to say that I knew Lacheneur."

"Well, then!" insisted M. Segmuller, "what did you mean by that?"

"It's very easy to understand, sir."

M. Segmuller rose. "Don't prevaricate any longer," he said. "You certainly ordered your wife not to say anything about Lacheneur. That's evident. Why did you do so? What are you afraid of her telling us? Do you suppose the police are

ignorant of your acquaintance with Lacheneur—of your conversation with him when he came in a cab to the corner of the waste ground near your mother's wine-shop; and of the hopes of fortune you based upon his promises? Be guided by me; confess everything, while there is yet time; and abandon the present course which may lead you into serious danger. One may be an accomplice in more ways than one."

As these words fell on Polyte's ears, it was evident his impudence and indifference had received a severe shock. He seemed confounded, and hung his head as if thoroughly abashed. Still, he preserved an obstinate silence; and the magistrate finding that this last thrust had failed to produce any effect, gave up the fight in despair. He rang the bell, and ordered the guard to conduct the witness back to prison, and to take every precaution to prevent him seeing his wife again.

When Polyte had departed, Lecoq reentered the room. "Ah, sir," said he, despondently, "to think that I didn't draw out of this woman everything she knew, when I might have done so easily. But I thought you would be waiting for me, and made haste to bring her here. I thought I was acting for the best—"

"Never mind, the misfortune can be repaired."

"No, sir, no. Since she has seen her husband, it is quite impossible to get her to speak. She loves that rascal intensely, and he has a wonderful influence over her. You heard what he said. He threatened her with death if she breathed a word about Lacheneur, and she is so terrified that there is no hope of making her speak."

Lecoq's apprehension was based on fact, as M. Segmuller himself perceived the instant Toinon the Virtuous again set foot in his office. The poor creature seemed nearly heartbroken, and it was evident she would have given her life to retract the words that had escaped her when first questioned by Lecoq. Polyte's threat had aroused the most sinister apprehensions in her mind. Not understanding his connection with the affair, she asked herself if her testimony might not prove his death-warrant. Accordingly, she answered all M. Segmuller's questions with "no" or "I don't know"; and retracted everything she had previously stated to Lecoq. She swore that she had been misunderstood, that her words had been misconstrued; and vowed on her mother's memory, that she had never heard the name of Lacheneur before. At last, she burst into wild,

despairing sobs, and pressed her frightened child against her breast.

What could be done to overcome this foolish obstinacy, as blind and unreasoning as a brute's? M. Segmuller hesitated. "You may retire, my good woman," said he kindly, after a moment's pause, "but remember that your strange silence injures your husband far more than anything you could say."

She left the room—or rather she rushed wildly from it as though only too eager to escape—and the magistrate and the detective exchanged glances of dismay and consternation.

"I said so before," thought Goguet, "the prisoner knows what he's about. I would be willing to bet a hundred to one in his favor."

A French investigating magistrate is possessed of almost unlimited powers. No one can hamper him, no one can give him orders. The entire police force is at his disposal. One word from him and twenty agents, or a hundred if need be, search Paris, ransack France, or explore Europe. If there be any one whom he believes able to throw light upon an obscure point, he simply sends an order to that person to appear before him, and the man must come even if he lives a hundred leagues away.

Such is the magistrate, such are his powers. On the other hand, the prisoner charged with a crime, but as yet unconvicted, is confined, unless his offense be of a trivial description, in what is called a "secret cell." He is, so to say, cut off from the number of the living. He knows nothing of what may be going on in the world outside. He can not tell what witnesses may have been called, or what they may have said, and in his uncertainty he asks himself again and again how far the prosecution has been able to establish the charges against him.

Such is the prisoner's position, and yet despite the fact that the two adversaries are so unequally armed, the man in the secret cell not unfrequently wins the victory. If he is sure that he has left behind him no proof of his having committed the crime; if he has no guilty antecedents to be afraid of, he can—impregnable in a defense of absolute denial—brave all the attacks of justice.

Such was, at this moment, the situation of May, the mysterious murderer; as both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were forced

to admit, with mingled grief and anger. They had hoped to arrive at a solution of the problem by examining Polyte Chupin and his wife, and they had been disappointed; for the prisoner's identity remained as problematical as ever.

"And yet," exclaimed the magistrate impatiently, "these people know something about this matter, and if they would only speak—"

"But they won't."

"What motive is it that keeps them silent? This is what we must discover. Who will tell us the price that has been promised Polyte Chupin for his silence? What recompense can he count upon? It must be a great one, for he is braving real danger!"

Lecoq did not immediately reply to the magistrate's successive queries, but it was easy to see from his knit brows that his mind was hard at work. "You ask me, sir," he eventually remarked, "*what* reward has been promised Chupin? I ask on my part *who* can have promised him this reward?"

"Who has promised it? Why, plainly the accomplice who has beaten us on every point."

"Yes," rejoined Lecoq, "I suppose it must have been he. It certainly looks like his handiwork—now, what artifice can he have used? We know how he managed to have an interview with the Widow Chupin, but how has he succeeded in getting at Polyte, who is in prison, closely watched?"

The young detective's insinuation, vague as it was, did not escape M. Segmuller. "What do you mean?" asked the latter, with an air of mingled surprise and indignation. "You can't suppose that one of the keepers has been bribed?"

Lecoq shook his head, in a somewhat equivocal manner. "I mean nothing," he replied, "I don't suspect any one. All I want is information. Has Chupin been forewarned or not?"

"Yes, of course he has."

"Then if that point is admitted it can only be explained in two ways. Either there are informers in the prison, or else Chupin has been allowed to see some visitor."

These suppositions evidently worried M. Segmuller, who for a moment seemed to hesitate between the two opinions; then, suddenly making up his mind, he rose from his chair, took up his hat, and said: "This matter must be cleared up. Come with me, Monsieur Lecoq."

A couple of minutes later, the magistrate and the detective

had reached the Depot, which is connected with the Palais de Justice by a narrow passage, especially reserved for official use. The prisoners' morning rations had just been served to them, and the governor was walking up and down the courtyard, in the company of Inspector Gevrol. As soon as he perceived M. Segmuller he hastened toward him and asked if he had not come about the prisoner May.

As the magistrate nodded assent, the governor at once added: "Well I was only just now telling Inspector Gevrol that I was very well satisfied with May's behavior. It has not only been quite unnecessary to place him in the strait-waistcoat again, but his mood seems to have changed entirely. He eats with a good appetite; he is as gay as a lark, and he constantly laughs and jests with his keeper."

Gevrol had pricked up his ears when he heard himself named by the governor, and considering this mention to be a sufficient introduction, he thought there would be no impropriety in his listening to the conversation. Accordingly, he approached the others, and noted with some satisfaction the troubled glances which Lecoq and the magistrate exchanged.

M. Segmuller was plainly perplexed. May's gay manner to which the governor of the Depot alluded might perhaps have been assumed for the purpose of sustaining his character as a jester and buffoon, it might be due to a certainty of defeating the judicial inquiry, or, who knows? the prisoner had perhaps received some favorable news from outside.

With Lecoq's last words still ringing in his ears, it is no wonder that the magistrate should have dwelt on this last supposition. "Are you quite sure," he asked, "that no communication from outside can reach the inmates of the secret cells?"

The governor of the Depot was cut to the quick by M. Segmuller's implied doubt. What! were his subordinates suspected? Was his own professional honesty impugned? He could not help lifting his hands to heaven in mute protest against such an unjust charge.

"Am I sure?" he exclaimed. "Then you can never have visited the secret cells. You have no idea, then, of their situation; you are unacquainted with the triple bolts that secure the doors; the grating that shuts out the sunlight, to say nothing of the guard who walks beneath the windows day and night. Why, a bird couldn't even reach the prisoners in those cells."

Such a description was bound to reassure the most skeptical mind, and M. Segmuller breathed again: "Now that I am easy on that score," said he, "I should like some information about another prisoner—a fellow named Chupin, who isn't in the secret cells. I want to know if any visitor came for him yesterday."

"I must speak to the registrar," replied the governor, "before I can answer you with certainty. Wait a moment though, here comes a man who can perhaps tell us. He is usually on guard at the entrance. Here, Ferraud, this way!"

The man to whom the governor called hastened to obey the summons.

"Do you know whether any one asked to see the prisoner Chupin yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, I went to fetch Chupin to the parlor myself."

"And who was his visitor?" eagerly asked Lecoq, "wasn't he a tall man; very red in the face—"

"Excuse me, sir, the visitor was a lady—his aunt, at least so Chupin told me."

Neither M. Segmuller nor Lecoq could restrain an exclamation of surprise. "What was she like?" they both asked at the same time.

"She was short," replied the attendant, "with a very fair complexion and light hair; she seemed to be a very respectable woman."

"It must have been one of the female fugitives who escaped from the Widow Chupin's hovel," exclaimed Lecoq.

Gevrol, hitherto an attentive listener, burst into a loud laugh. "Still that Russian princess," said he.

Neither the magistrate nor the young detective relished this unseasonable jest. "You forget yourself, sir," said M. Segmuller severely. "You forget that the sneers you address to your comrade also apply to me!"

The General saw that he had gone too far; and while glancing hatefully at Lecoq, he mumbled an apology to the magistrate. The latter did not apparently hear him, for, bowing to the governor, he motioned Lecoq to follow him away.

"Run to the Prefecture of Police," he said as soon as they were out of hearing, "and ascertain how and under what pretext this woman obtained permission to see Polyte Chupin."

ON his way back to his office, M. Segmuller mentally reviewed the position of affairs; and came to the conclusion that as he had failed to take the citadel of defense by storm, he must resign himself to a regular protracted siege. He was exceedingly annoyed at the constant failures that had attended all Lecoq's efforts; for time was on the wing, and he knew that in a criminal investigation delay only increased the uncertainty of success. The more promptly a crime is followed by judicial action the easier it is to find the culprit, and prove his guilt. The longer investigation is delayed the more difficult it becomes to adduce conclusive evidence.

In the present instance there were various matters that M. Segmuller might at once attend to. With which should he begin? Ought he not to confront May, the Widow Chupin, and Polyte with the bodies of their victims? Such horrible meetings have at times the most momentous results, and more than one murderer when unsuspectedly brought into the presence of his victim's lifeless corpse has changed color and lost his assurance.

Then there were other witnesses whom M. Segmuller might examine. Papillon, the cab-driver; the concierge of the house in the Rue de Bourgogne—where the two women flying from the Poivriere had momentarily taken refuge; as well as a certain Madame Milner, landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg. In addition, it would also be advisable to summon, with the least possible delay, some of the people residing in the vicinity of the Poivriere; together with some of Polyte's habitual companions, and the landlord of the Rainbow, where the victims and the murderer had apparently passed the evening of the crime. Of course, there was no reason to expect any great revelations from any of these witnesses, still they might know something, they might have an opinion to express, and in the present darkness one single ray of light, however faint, might mean salvation.

Obeying the magistrate's orders, Goguet, the smiling clerk, had just finished drawing up at least a dozen summonses, when Lecoq returned from the Prefecture. M. Segmuller at once asked him the result of his errand.

"Ah, sir," replied the young detective, "I have a fresh proof of that mysterious accomplice's skill. The permit that was used yesterday to see young Chupin was in the name of his mother's sister, a woman named Rose Pitard. A visiting card was given her more than a week ago, in compliance with a request indorsed by the commissary of police of her district."

The magistrate's surprise was so intense that it imparted to his face an almost ludicrous expression. "Is this aunt also in the plot?" he murmured.

"I don't think so," replied Lecoq, shaking his head. "At all events, it wasn't she who went to the prison parlor yesterday. The clerks at the Prefecture remember the widow's sister very well, and gave me a full description of her. She's a woman over five feet high, with a very dark complexion; and very wrinkled and weatherbeaten about the face. She's quite sixty years old; whereas, yesterday's visitor was short and fair, and not more than forty-five."

"If that's the case," interrupted M. Segmuller, "this visitor must be one of our fugitives."

"I don't think so."

"Who do you suppose she was, then?"

"Why, the landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg—that clever woman who succeeded so well in deceiving me. But she had better take care! There are means of verifying my suspicions."

The magistrate scarcely heard Lecoq's last words, so enraged was he at the inconceivable audacity and devotion displayed by so many people: all of whom were apparently willing to run the greatest risks so long as they could only assure the murderer's incognito.

"But how could the accomplice have known of the existence of this permit?" he asked after a pause.

"Oh, nothing could be easier, sir," replied Lecoq. "When the Widow Chupin and the accomplice had that interview at the station-house near the Barriere d'Italie, they both realized the necessity of warning Polyte. While trying to devise some means of getting to him, the old woman remembered her sister's visiting card, and the man made some excuse to borrow it."

"Yes, such must be the case," said M. Segmuller, approvingly. "It will be necessary to ascertain, however—"

"And I *will* ascertain," interrupted Lecoq, with a resolute air, "if you will only intrust the matter to me, sir. If you will authorize me I will have two spies on the watch before to-night, one in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, and the other at the door of the Hotel de Mariembourg. If the accomplice ventured to visit Toinon or Madame Milner he would be arrested; and then we should have our turn!"

However, there was no time to waste in vain words and idle boasting. Lecoq therefore checked himself, and took up his hat preparatory to departure. "Now," said he, "I must ask you, sir, for my liberty; if you have any orders, you will find a trusty messenger in the corridor, Father Absinthe, one of my colleagues. I want to find out something about Lacheneur's letter and the diamond earring."

"Go, then," replied M. Segmuller, "and good luck to you!"

Good luck! Yes, indeed, Lecoq looked for it. If up to the present moment he had taken his successive defeats good-humoredly, it was because he believed that he had a talisman in his pocket which was bound to insure ultimate victory.

"I shall be very stupid if I can't discover the owner of such a valuable jewel," he soliloquized, referring to the diamond earring. "And when I find the owner I shall at the same time discover our mysterious prisoner's identity."

The first step to be taken was to ascertain whom the earring had been bought from. It would naturally be a tedious process to go from jeweler to jeweler and ask: "Do you know this jewel, was it set by you, and if so whom did you sell it to?" But fortunately Lecoq was acquainted with a man whose knowledge of the trade might at once throw light on the matter. This individual was an old Hollander, named Van Numen, who, as a connoisseur in precious stones, was probably without his rival in Paris. He was employed by the Prefecture of Police as an expert in all such matters. He was considered rich. Despite his shabby appearance, he was rightly considered rich, and, in point of fact, he was indeed far more wealthy than people generally supposed. Diamonds were his especial passion, and he always had several in his pocket, in a little box which he would pull out and open at least a dozen times an hour, just as a snuff-taker continually produces his snuff-box.

This worthy man greeted Lecoq very affably. He put on his glasses, examined the jewel with a grimace of satisfaction, and, in the tone of an oracle, remarked: "That stone is worth eight thousand francs, and it was set by Doisty, in the Rue de la Paix."

Twenty minutes later Lecoq entered this well-known jeweler's establishment. Van Numen had not been mistaken. Doisty immediately recognized the earring, which had, indeed, come from his shop. But whom had he sold it to? He could not recollect, for it had passed out of his hands three or four years before.

"Wait a moment though," said he, "I will just ask my wife, who has a wonderful memory."

Madame Doisty truly deserved this eulogium. A single glance at the jewel enabled her to say that she had seen this earring before, and that the pair had been purchased from them by the Marchioness d'Arlange.

"You must recollect," she added, turning to her husband, "that the Marchioness only gave us nine thousand francs on account, and that we had all the trouble in the world to make her pay the balance."

Her husband did remember this circumstance; and in recording his recollection, he exchanged a significant glance with his wife.

"Now," said the detective, "I should like to have this marchioness's address."

"She lives in the Faubourg St. Germain," replied Madame Doisty, "near the Esplanade des Invalides."

Lecoq had refrained from any sign of satisfaction while he was in the jeweler's presence. But directly he had left the shop he evinced such delirious joy that the passers-by asked themselves in amazement if he were not mad. He did not walk, but fairly danced over the stones, gesticulating in the most ridiculous fashion as he addressed this triumphant monologue to the empty air: "At last," said he, "this affair emerges from the mystery that has enshrouded it. At last I reach the veritable actors in the drama, the exalted personages whose existence I had suspected. Ah! Gevrol, my illustrious General! you talked about a Russian princess, but you will be obliged to content yourself with a simple marchioness."

But the vertigo that had seized the young detective gradually disappeared. His good sense reasserted itself, and, looking

calmly at the situation, he felt that he should need all his presence of mind, penetration, and sagacity to bring the expedition to a successful finish. What course should he pursue, on entering the marchioness's presence, in order to draw from her a full confession and to obtain full particulars of the murder, as well as the murderer's name!

"It will be best to threaten her, to frighten her into confession," he soliloquized. "If I give her time for reflection, I shall learn nothing."

He paused in his cogitations, for he had reached the residence of the Marchioness d'Arlange—a charming mansion with a courtyard in front and garden in the rear. Before entering, he deemed it advisable to obtain some information concerning the inmates.

"It is here, then," he murmured, "that I am to find the solution of the enigma! Here, behind these embroidered curtains, dwells the frightened fugitive of the other night. What agony of fear must torture her since she has discovered the loss of her earring!"

For more than an hour, standing under a neighbor's *porte cochere*, Lecoq remained watching the house. He would have liked to see the face of any one; but the time passed by and not even a shadow could be detected behind the curtain; not even a servant passed across the courtyard. At last, losing patience, the young detective determined to make inquiries in the neighborhood, for he could not take a decisive step without obtaining some knowledge of the people he was to encounter. While wondering where he could obtain the information he required, he perceived, on the opposite side of the street, the keeper of a wine-shop smoking on his doorstep.

At once approaching and pretending that he had forgotten an address, Lecoq politely asked for the house where Marchioness d'Arlange resided. Without a word, and without condescending to take his pipe from his mouth, the man pointed to the mansion which Lecoq had previously watched.

There was a way, however, to make him more communicative, namely, to enter the shop, call for something to drink, and invite the landlord to drink as well. This was what Lecoq did, and the sight of two well-filled glasses unbound, as by enchantment, the man's hitherto silent tongue. The young detective could not have found a better person to question, for this same individual had been established in the neighborhood for

ten years, and enjoyed among the servants of the aristocratic families here residing a certain amount of confidence.

"I pity you if you are going to the marchioness's house to collect a bill," he remarked to Lecoq. "You will have plenty of time to learn the way here before you see your money. You will only be another of the many creditors who never let her bell alone."

"The deuce! Is she as poor as that?"

"Poor! Why, every one knows that she has a comfortable income, without counting this house. But when one spends double one's income every year, you know—"

The landlord stopped short, to call Lecoq's attention to two ladies who were passing along the street, one of them, a woman of forty, dressed in black; the other, a girl half-way through her teens. "There," quoth the wine-seller, "goes the marchioness's granddaughter, Mademoiselle Claire, with her governess, Mademoiselle Smith."

Lecoq's head whirled. "Her granddaughter!" he stammered.

"Yes—the daughter of her deceased son, if you prefer it."

"How old is the marchioness, then?"

"At least sixty: but one would never suspect it. She is one of those persons who live a hundred years. And what an old wretch she is too. She would think no more of knocking me over the head than I would of emptying this glass of wine—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Lecoq, "but does she live alone in that great house?"

"Yes—that is—with her granddaughter, the governess, and two servants. But what is the matter with you?"

This last question was not uncalled for; for Lecoq had turned deadly white. The magic edifice of his hopes had crumbled beneath the weight of this man's words as completely as if it were some frail house of cards erected by a child. He had only sufficient strength to murmur: "Nothing—nothing at all."

Then, as he could endure this torture of uncertainty no longer, he went toward the marchioness's house and rang the bell. The servant who came to open the door examined him attentively, and then announced that Madame d'Arlange was in the country. He evidently fancied that Lecoq was a creditor.

But the young detective insisted so adroitly, giving the lackey to understand so explicitly that he did not come to collect money, and speaking so earnestly of urgent business, that the

servant finally admitted him to the hall, saying that he would go and see if madame had really gone out.

Fortunately for Lecoq, she happened to be at home, and an instant afterward the valet returned requesting the young detective to follow him. After passing through a large and magnificently furnished drawing-room, they reached a charming boudoir, hung with rose-colored curtains, where, sitting by the fireside, in a large easy-chair, Lecoq found an old woman, tall, bony, and terrible of aspect, her face loaded with paint, and her person covered with ornaments. The aged coquette was Madame, the Marchioness, who, for the time being, was engaged in knitting a stripe of green wool. She turned toward her visitor just enough to show him the rouge on one cheek, and then, as he seemed rather frightened—a fact flattering to her vanity—she spoke in an affable tone. "Ah, well! young man," said she, "what brings you here?"

In point of fact, Lecoq was not frightened, but he was intensely disappointed to find that Madame d'Arlange could not possibly be one of the women who had escaped from the Widow Chupin's hovel on the night of the murder. There was nothing about her appearance that corresponded in the least degree with the descriptions given by Papillon.

Remembering the small footprints left in the snow by the two fugitives, the young detective glanced, moreover, at the marchioness's feet, just perceivable beneath her skirt, and his disappointment reached its climax when he found that they were truly colossal in size.

"Well, are you dumb?" inquired the old lady, raising her voice.

Without making a direct reply, Lecoq produced the precious earring, and, placing it upon the table beside the marchioness, remarked: "I bring you this jewel, madame, which I have found, and which, I am told, belongs to you."

Madame de'Arlange laid down her knitting and proceeded to examine the earring. "It is true," she said, after a moment, "that this ornament formerly belonged to me. It was a fancy I had, about four years ago, and it cost me dear—at least twenty thousand francs. Ah! Doisty, the man who sold me those diamonds, must make a handsome income. But I had a granddaughter to educate! and pressing need of money compelled me to sell them."

"To whom?" asked Lecoq, eagerly.

"Eh?" exclaimed the old lady, evidently shocked at his audacity, "you are very inquisitive upon my word!"

"Excuse me, madame, but I am anxious to find the owner of this valuable ornament."

Madame d'Arlange regarded her visitor with an air of mingled curiosity and surprise. "Such honesty!" said she. "Oh, oh! And of course you don't hope for a sou by way of reward—"

"Madame!"

"Good, good! There is not the least need for you to turn as red as a poppy, young man. I sold these diamonds to a great Austrian lady—the Baroness de Watchau."

"And where does this lady reside?"

"At the Pere la Chaise, probably, since she died about a year ago. Ah! these women of the present day—an extra waltz, or the merest draft, and it's all over with them! In my time, after each gallop, we girls used to swallow a tumbler of sweetened wine, and sit down between two open doors. And we did very well, as you see."

"But, madame," insisted Lecoq, "the Baroness de Watchau must have left some one behind her—a husband, or children—"

"No one but a brother, who holds a court position at Vienna: and who could not leave even to attend the funeral. He sent orders that all his sister's personal property should be sold—not even excepting her wardrobe—and the money sent to him."

Lecoq could not repress an exclamation of disappointment. "How unfortunate!" he murmured.

"Why?" asked the old lady. "Under these circumstances, the diamond will probably remain in your hands, and I am rejoiced that it should be so. It will be a fitting reward for your honesty."

Madame d'Arlange was naturally not aware that her remark implied the most exquisite torture for Lecoq. Ah! if it should be as she said, if he should *never* find the lady who had lost this costly jewel! Smarting under the marchioness's unintended irony, he would have liked to apostrophize her in angry terms; but it could not be, for it was advisable if not absolutely necessary that he should conceal his true identity. Accordingly, he contrived to smile, and even stammered an acknowledgment of Madame d'Arlange's good wishes. Then, as if he had no more to expect, he made her a low bow and withdrew.

This new misfortune well-nigh overwhelmed him. One by

one all the threads upon which he had relied to guide him out of this intricate labyrinth were breaking in his hands. In the present instance he could scarcely be the dupe of some fresh comedy, for if the murderer's accomplice had taken Doisty, the jeweler, into his confidence he would have instructed him to say that the earring had never come from his establishment, and that he could not consequently tell whom it had been sold to. On the contrary, however, Doisty and his wife had readily given Madame d'Arlange's name, and all the circumstances pointed in favor of their sincerity. Then, again, there was good reason to believe in the veracity of the marchioness's assertions. They were sufficiently authenticated by a significant glance which Lecoq had detected between the jeweler and his wife. The meaning of this glance could not be doubted. It implied plainly that both husband and wife were of opinion that in buying these earrings the marchioness engaged in one of those little speculations which are more common than many people might suppose among ladies moving in high-class society. Being in urgent want of ready money, she had bought on credit at a high price to sell for cash at a loss.

As Lecoq was anxious to investigate the matter as far as possible, he returned to Doisty's establishment, and, by a plausible pretext, succeeded in gaining a sight of the books in which the jeweler recorded his transactions. He soon found the sale of the earrings duly recorded—specified by Madame Doisty at the date—both in the day-book and the ledger. Madame d'Arlange first paid 9,000 francs on account and the balance of the purchase money (an equivalent sum) had been received in instalments at long intervals subsequently. Now, if it had been easy for Madame Milner to make a false entry in her traveler's registry at the Hotel de Mariembourg, it was absurd to suppose that the jeweler had falsified all his accounts for four years. Hence, the facts were indisputable; and yet, the young detective was not satisfied.

He hurried to the Faubourg Saint Honore, to the house formerly occupied by the Baroness de Watchau, and there found a good-natured concierge, who at once informed him that after the Baroness's death her furniture and personal effects had been taken to the great auction mart in the Rue Drouot; the sale being conducted by M. Petit, the eminent auctioneer.

Without losing a minute, Lecoq hastened to this individual's office. M. Petit remembered the Watchau sale very well; it

had made quite a sensation at the time, and on searching among his papers he soon found a long catalogue of the various articles sold. Several lots of jewelry were mentioned, with the sums paid, and the names of the purchasers; but there was not the slightest allusion to these particular earrings. When Lecoq produced the diamond he had in his pocket, the auctioneer could not remember that he had ever seen it; though of course this was no evidence to the contrary, for, as he himself remarked,—so many articles passed through his hands! However, this much he could declare upon oath; the baroness's brother, her only heir, had preserved nothing—not so much as a pin's worth of his sister's effects: although he had been in a great hurry to receive the proceeds, which amounted to the pleasant sum of one hundred and sixty-seven thousand five hundred and thirty francs, all expenses deducted.

"Everything this lady possessed was sold?" inquired Lecoq.

"Everything."

"And what is the name of this brother of hers?"

"Watchau, also. The baroness had probably married one of her relatives. Until last year her brother occupied a very prominent diplomatic position. I think he now resides at Berlin."

Certainly this information would not seem to indicate that the auctioneer had been tampered with; and yet Lecoq was not satisfied. "It is very strange," he thought, as he walked toward his lodgings, "that whichever side I turn, in this affair, I find mention of Germany. The murderer comes from Leipsic, Madame Milner must be a Bavarian, and now here is an Austrian baroness."

It was too late to make any further inquiries that evening, and Lecoq went to bed; but the next morning, at an early hour, he resumed his investigations with fresh ardor. There now seemed only one remaining clue to success: the letter signed "Lacheneur," which had been found in the pocket of the murdered soldier. This letter, judging from the half-effaced heading at the top of the note-paper, must have been written in some café on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. To discover which precise cafe would be mere child's play; and indeed the fourth landlord to whom Lecoq exhibited the letter recognized the paper as his. But neither he, nor his wife, nor the young lady at the counter, nor the waiters, nor any of the customers present at the time, had ever once heard mention made of this singular name—Lacheneur.

And now what was Lecoq to do? Was the case utterly hopeless? Not yet. Had not the spurious soldier declared that this Lacheneur was an old comedian? Seizing upon this frail clue, as a drowning man clutches at the merest fragment of the floating wreck, Lecoq turned his steps in another direction, and hurried from theatre to theatre, asking every one, from doorkeeper to manager: "Don't you know an actor named Lacheneur?"

Alas! one and all gave a negative reply, at times indulging in some rough joke at the oddity of the name. And when any one asked the young detective what the man he was seeking was like, what could he reply? His answer was necessarily limited to the virtuous Toinon's phrase: "I thought him a very respectable-looking gentleman." This was not a very graphic description, however, and, besides, it was rather doubtful what a woman like Polyte Chupin's wife might mean by the word "respectable." Did she apply it to the man's age, to his personal aspect, or to his apparent fortune.

Sometimes those whom Lecoq questioned would ask what parts this comedian of his was in the habit of playing; and then the young detective could make no reply whatever. He kept for himself the harassing thought that the rôle now being performed by the unknown Lacheneur was driving him—Lecoq—wild with despair.

Eventually our hero had recourse to a method of investigation which, strange to say, the police seldom employ, save in extreme cases, although it is at once sensible and simple, and generally fraught with success. It consists in examining all the hotel and lodging-house registers, in which the landlords are compelled to record the names of their tenants, even should the latter merely sojourn under their roofs for a single night.

Rising long before daybreak and going to bed late at night, Lecoq spent all his time in visiting the countless hotels and furnished lodgings in Paris. But still and ever his search was vain. He never once came across the name of Lacheneur; and at last he began to ask himself if such a name really existed, or if it were not some pseudonym invented for convenience. He had not found it even in Didot's directory, the so-called "Almanach Boitin," where one finds all the most singular and absurd names in France—those which are formed of the most fantastic mingling of syllables.

Still, nothing could daunt him or turn him from the almost

impossible task he had undertaken, and his obstinate perseverance well-nigh developed into monomania. He was no longer subject to occasional outbursts of anger, quickly repressed; but lived in a state of constant exasperation, which soon impaired the clearness of his mind. No more theories, or ingenious deductions, no more subtle reasoning. He pursued his search without method and without order—much as Father Absinthe might have done when under the influence of alcohol. Perhaps he had come to rely less upon his own shrewdness than upon chance to reveal to him the substance of the mystery, of which he had as yet only detected the shadow.

XVIII

WHEN a heavy stone is thrown into a lake a considerable commotion ensues, the water spouts and seethes and bubbles and frequently a tall jet leaps into the air. But all this agitation only lasts for a moment; the bubbling subsides as the circles of the passing whirlpool grow larger and larger; the surface regains at last its customary smoothness; and soon no trace remains of the passage of the stone, now buried in the depths below.

So it is with the events of our daily life, however momentous they may appear at the hour of their occurrence. It seems as if their impressions would last for years; but no, they speedily sink into the depths of the past, and time obliterates their passage—just as the water of the lake closes over and hides the stone, for an instant the cause of such commotion. Thus it was that at the end of a fortnight the frightful crime committed in the Widow Chupin's drinking-den, the triple murder which had made all Paris shudder, which had furnished the material for so many newspaper articles, and the topic for such indignant comments, was completely forgotten. Indeed, had the tragedy at the Poivriere occurred in the times of Charlemagne, it could not have passed more thoroughly out of people's minds. It was remembered only in three places, at the Depot, at the Prefecture de Police, and at the Palais de Justice.

M. Segmuller's repeated efforts had proved as unsuccessful as Lecoq's. Skilful questioning, ingenious insinuations, forcible threats, and seductive promises had proved powerless to overcome the dogged spirit of absolute denial which persistently animated, not merely the prisoner May, but also the Widow Chupin, her son Polyte, Toinon the Virtuous, and Madame Milner. The evidence of these various witnesses showed plainly enough that they were all in league with the mysterious accomplice; but what did this knowledge avail? Their attitude never varied! And, even if at times their looks gave the lie to their denials, one could always read in their eyes an unshaken determination to conceal the truth.

There were moments when the magistrate, overpowered by a sense of the insufficiency of the purely moral weapons at his disposal, almost regretted that the Inquisition was suppressed. Yes, in presence of the lies that were told him, lies so impudent that they were almost insults, he no longer wondered at the judicial cruelties of the Middle Ages, or at the use of the muscle-breaking rack, the flesh-burning, red-hot pincers, and other horrible instruments, which, by the physical torture they inflicted, forced the most obstinate culprit to confess. The prisoner May's manner was virtually unaltered; and far from showing any signs of weakness, his assurance had, if anything, increased, as though he were confident of ultimate victory and as though he had in some way learned that the prosecution had failed to make the slightest progress.

On one occasion, when summoned before M. Segmuller, he ventured to remark in a tone of covert irony: "Why do you keep me confined so long in a secret cell? Am I never to be set at liberty or sent to the assizes. Am I to suffer much longer on account of your fantastic idea that I am some great personage in disguise?"

"I shall keep you until you have confessed," was M. Segmuller's answer.

"Confessed what?"

"Oh! you know very well."

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders at these last words, and then in a tone of mingled despondency and mockery retorted: "In that case there is no hope of my ever leaving this cursed prison!"

It was probably this conviction that induced him to make all seeming preparations for an indefinite stay. He applied

for and obtained a portion of the contents of the trunk found at the Hotel de Mariembourg, and evinced great joy when the various knickknacks and articles of clothing were handed over to him. Thanks to the money found upon his person when arrested, and deposited with the prison registrar, he was, moreover, able to procure many little luxuries, which are never denied to unconvicted prisoners, no matter what may be the charges against them, for they have a right to be considered as innocent until a jury has decided to the contrary. To while away the time, May next asked for a volume of Beranger's songs, and his request being granted, he spent most of the day in learning several of the ditties by heart, singing them in a loud voice and with considerable taste. This fancy having excited some comment, he pretended that he was cultivating a talent which might be useful to him when he was set at liberty. For he had no doubt of his acquittal; at least, so he declared; and if he were anxious about the date of his trial, he did not show the slightest apprehension concerning its result.

He was never despondent save when he spoke of his profession. To all appearance he pined for the stage, and, in fact, he almost wept when he recalled the fantastic, many-colored costumes, clad in which he had once appeared before crowded audiences—audiences that had been convulsed with laughter by his sallies of wit, delivered between bursts of noisy music. He seemed to have become altogether a better fellow; more frank, communicative, and submissive. He eagerly embraced every opportunity to babble about his past, and over and over again did he recount the adventures of the roving life he had led while in the employ of M. Simpson, the showman. He had, of course, traveled a great deal; and he remembered everything he had seen; possessing, moreover, an inexhaustible fund of amusing stories, with which he entertained his custodians. His manner and his words were so natural that head keepers and subordinate turnkeys alike were quite willing to give credit to his assertions.

The governor of the Depot alone remained unconvinced. He had declared that this pretended buffoon must be some dangerous criminal who had escaped from Cayenne, and who for this reason was determined to conceal his antecedents. Such being this functionary's opinion, he tried every means to substantiate it. Accordingly, during an entire fortnight,

May was submitted to the scrutiny of innumerable members of the police force, to whom were added all the more notable private detectives of the capital. No one recognized him, however, and although his photograph was sent to all the prisons and police stations of the empire, not one of the officials could recognize his features.

Other circumstances occurred, each of which had its influence, and one and all of them speaking in the prisoner's favor. For instance, the second bureau of the Prefecture de Police found positive traces of the existence of a strolling artist, named Tringlot, who was probably the man referred to in May's story. This Tringlot had been dead several years. Then again, inquiries made in Germany revealed the fact that a certain M. Simpson was very well known in that country, where he had achieved great celebrity as a circus manager.

In presence of this information and the negative result of the scrutiny to which May had been subjected, the governor of the Depot abandoned his views and openly confessed that he had been mistaken. "The prisoner, May," he wrote to the magistrate, "is really and truly what he pretends to be. There can be no further doubt on the subject." This message, it may be added, was sent at Gevrol's instigation.

So thus it was that M. Segmuller and Lecoq alone remained of their opinion. This opinion was at least worthy of consideration, as they alone knew all the details of the investigation which had been conducted with such strict secrecy; and yet this fact was of little import. It is not merely unpleasant, but often extremely dangerous to struggle on against all the world, and unfortunately for truth and logic one man's opinion, correct though it may be, is nothing in the balance of daily life against the faulty views of a thousand adversaries.

The "May affair" had soon become notorious among the members of the police force; and whenever Lecoq appeared at the Prefecture he had to brave his colleagues' sarcastic pleasantry. Nor did M. Segmuller escape scot free; for more than one fellow magistrate, meeting him on the stairs or in the corridor, inquired, with a smile, what he was doing with his Caspar-Hauser, his man in the Iron Mask, in a word, with his mysterious mountebank. When thus assailed, both M. Segmuller and Lecoq could scarcely restrain those movements of angry impatience which come naturally to a person who feels certain he is in the right and yet can not prove it.

"Ah, me!" sometimes exclaimed the magistrate, "why did D'Escorval break his leg? Had it not been for that cursed mishap, he would have been obliged to endure all these perplexities, and I—I should be enjoying myself like other people."

"And I thought myself so shrewd!" murmured the young detective by his side.

Little by little anxiety did its work. Magistrate and detective both lost their appetites and looked haggard; and yet the idea of yielding never once occurred to them. Although of very different natures, they were both determined to persevere in the task they had set themselves—that of solving this tantalizing enigma. Lecoq, indeed, had resolved to renounce all other claims upon his time, and to devote himself entirely to the study of the case. "Henceforth," he said to M. Segmuller, "I also will constitute myself a prisoner; and although the suspected murderer will be unable to see *me*, I shall not lose sight of *him!*"

It so happened that there was a loft between the cell occupied by May and the roof of the prison, a loft of such diminutive proportions that a man of average height could not stand upright in it. This loft had neither window nor skylight, and the gloom would have been intense, had not a few faint sunrays struggled through the interstices of some ill-adjusted tiles. In this unattractive garret Lecoq established himself one fine morning, just at the hour when May was taking his daily walk in the courtyard of the prison accompanied by a couple of keepers. Under these circumstances there was no fear of Lecoq's movements attracting the prisoner's notice or suspicion. The garret had a paved floor, and first of all the young detective removed one of the stones with a pickax he had brought for the purpose. Beneath this stone he found a timber beam, through which he next proceeded to bore a hole of funnel shape, large at the top and gradually dwindling until on piercing the ceiling of the cell it was no more than two-thirds of an inch in diameter. Prior to commencing his operations, Lecoq had visited the prisoner's quarters and had skilfully chosen the place of the projected aperture, so that the stains and graining of the beam would hide it from the view of any one below. He was yet at work when the governor of the Depot and his rival Gevrol appeared upon the threshold of the loft.

"So this is to be your observatory, Monsieur Lecoq!" remarked Gevrol, with a sneering laugh.

"Yes, sir."

"You will not be very comfortable here."

"I shall be less uncomfortable than you suppose; I have brought a large blanket with me, and I shall stretch myself out on the floor and manage to sleep here.

"So that, night and day, you will have your eye on the prisoner?"

"Yes, night and day."

"Without giving yourself time to eat or drink?" inquired Gevrol.

"Excuse me! Father Absinthe will bring me my meals, execute any errand I may have, and relieve me at times if necessary."

The jealous General laughed; but his laugh, loud as it was, was yet a trifle constrained. "Well, I pity you," he said.

"Very possibly."

"Do you know what you will look like, with your eye glued to that hole?"

"Like what? Tell me, we needn't stand on ceremony."

"Ah, well! you will look just like one of those silly naturalists who put all sorts of little insects under a magnifying glass, and spend their lives in watching them."

Lecoq had finished his work; and rose from his kneeling position. "You couldn't have found a better comparison, General," said he. "I owe my idea to those very naturalists you speak about so slightingly. By dint of studying those little creatures—as you say—under a microscope, these patient, gifted men discover the habits and instincts of the insect world. Very well, then. What they can do with an insect, I will do with a man!"

"Oh, ho!" said the governor of the prison, considerably astonished.

"Yes; that's my plan," continued Lecoq. "I want to learn this prisoner's secret; and I will do so. That I've sworn; and success must be mine, for, however strong his courage may be, he will have his moments of weakness, and then I shall be present at them. I shall be present if ever his will fails him, if, believing himself alone, he lets his mask fall, or forgets his part for an instant, if an indiscreet word escapes him in his sleep, if his despair elicits a groan, a gesture, or a look —I shall be there to take note of it."

The tone of resolution with which the young detective spoke

made a deep impression upon the governor's mind. For an instant he was a believer in Lecoq's theory; and he was impressed by the strangeness of this conflict between a prisoner, determined to preserve the secret of his identity, and the agent for the prosecution, equally determined to wrest it from him. "Upon my word, my boy, you are not wanting in courage and energy," said he.

"Misdirected as it may be," growled Gevrol, who, although he spoke very slowly and deliberately, was in his secret soul by no means convinced of what he said. Faith is contagious, and he was troubled in spite of himself by Lecoq's imperturbable assurance. What if this debutant in the profession should be right, and he, Gevrol, the oracle of the Prefecture, wrong! What shame and ridicule would be his portion, then! But once again he inwardly swore that this inexperienced youngster could be no match for an old veteran like himself, and then added aloud: "The prefect of police must have more money than he knows what to do with, to pay two men for such a nonsensical job as this."

Lecoq disdained to reply to this slighting remark. For more than a fortnight the General had profited of every opportunity to make himself as disagreeable as possible, and the young detective feared he would be unable to control his temper if the discussion continued. It would be better to remain silent, and to work and wait for success. To succeed would be revenge enough! Moreover, he was impatient to see these unwelcome visitors depart; believing, perhaps, that Gevrol was quite capable of attracting the prisoner's attention by some unusual sound.

As soon as they went away, Lecoq hastily spread his blanket over the stones and stretched himself out upon it in such a position that he could alternately apply his eye and his ear to the aperture. In this position he had an admirable view of the cell below. He could see the door, the bed, the table, and the chair; only the small space near the window and the window itself were beyond his range of observation. He had scarcely completed his survey, when he heard the bolts rattle: the prisoner was returning from his walk. He seemed in excellent spirits, and was just completing what was, undoubtedly, a very interesting story, since the keeper who accompanied him lingered for a moment to hear the finish. Lecoq was delighted with the success of his experiment. He could hear as easily

as he could see. Each syllable reached his ear distinctly, and he had not lost a single word of the recital, which was amusing, though rather coarse.

The turnkey soon left the cell; the bolts rattled once more, and the key grated in the lock. After walking once or twice across his cell, May took up his volume of Beranger and for an hour or more seemed completely engrossed in its contents. Finally, he threw himself down upon his bed. Here he remained until meal-time in the evening, when he rose and ate with an excellent appetite. He next resumed the study of his book, and did not go to bed until the lights were extinguished.

Lecoq knew well enough that during the night his eyes would not serve him, but he trusted that his ears might prove of use, hoping that some telltale word might escape the prisoner's lips during his restless slumber. In this expectation he was disappointed. May tossed to and fro upon his pallet; he sighed, and one might have thought he was sobbing, but not a syllable escaped his lips. He remained in bed until very late the next morning; but on hearing the bell sound the hour of breakfast, eleven o'clock, he sprang from his couch with a bound, and after capering about his cell for a few moments, began to sing, in a loud and cheerful voice, the old ditty:

"Diogene!
Sous ton manteau, libre et content,
Je ris, je bois, sans gene—"

The prisoner did not stop singing until a keeper entered his cell carrying his breakfast. The day now beginning differed in no respect from the one that had preceded it, neither did the night. The same might be said of the next day, and of those which followed. To sing, to eat, to sleep, to attend to his hands and nails—such was the life led by this so-called buffoon. His manner, which never varied, was that of a naturally cheerful man terribly bored.

Such was the perfection of his acting that, after six days and nights of constant surveillance, Lecoq had detected nothing decisive, nor even surprising. And yet he did not despair. He had noticed that every morning, while the employees of the prison were busy distributing the prisoner's food, May invariably began to sing the same ditty.

"Evidently this song is a signal," thought Lecoq. "What

can be going on there by the window I can't see? I must know to-morrow."

Accordingly on the following morning he arranged that May should be taken on his walk at half-past ten o'clock, and he then insisted that the governor should accompany him to the prisoner's cell. That worthy functionary was not very well pleased with the change in the usual order of things. "What do you wish to show me?" he asked. "What is there so very curious to see?"

"Perhaps nothing," replied Lecoq, "but perhaps something of great importance."

Eleven o'clock sounding soon after, he began singing the prisoner's song, and he had scarcely finished the second line, when a bit of bread, no larger than a bullet, adroitly thrown through the window, dropped at his feet.

A thunderbolt falling in May's cell would not have terrified the governor as much as did this inoffensive projectile. He stood in silent dismay; his mouth wide open, his eyes starting from their sockets, as if he distrusted the evidence of his own senses. What a disgrace! An instant before he would have staked his life upon the inviolability of the secret cells; and now he beheld his prison dishonored.

"A communication! a communication!" he repeated, with a horrified air.

Quick as lightning, Lecoq picked up the missile. "Ah," murmured he, "I guessed that this man was in communication with his friends."

The young detective's evident delight changed the governor's stupor into fury. "Ah! my prisoners are writing!" he exclaimed, wild with passion. "My warders are acting as postmen! By my faith, this matter shall be looked into."

So saying, he was about to rush to the door when Lecoq stopped him. "What are you going to do, sir?" he asked.

"I am going to call all the employees of this prison together, and inform them that there is a traitor among them, and that I must know who he is, as I wish to make an example of him. And if, in twenty-four hours from now, the culprit has not been discovered, every man connected with this prison shall be removed."

Again he started to leave the room, and Lecoq, this time, had almost to use force to detain him. "Be calm, sir; be calm," he entreated.

"I *will* punish—"

"Yes, yes—I understand that—but wait until you have regained your self-possession. It is quite possible that the guilty party may be one of the prisoners who assist in the distribution of food every morning."

"What does that matter?"

"Excuse me, but it matters a great deal. If you noise this discovery abroad, we shall never discover the truth. The traitor will not be fool enough to confess his guilt. We must be silent and wait. We will keep a close watch and detect the culprit in the very act."

These objections were so sensible that the governor yielded. "So be it," he sighed, "I will try and be patient. But let me see the missive that was enclosed in this bit of bread."

Lecoq could not consent to this proposal. "I warned M. Segmuller," said he, "that there would probably be something new this morning; and he will be waiting for me in his office. We must only examine the letter in his presence."

This remark was so correct that the governor assented; and they at once started for the Palais de Justice. On their way, Lecoq endeavored to convince his companion that it was wrong to deplore a circumstance which might be of incalculable benefit to the prosecution. "It was an illusion," said he, "to imagine that the governor of a prison could be more cunning than the prisoners entrusted to him. A prisoner is almost always a match in ingenuity for his custodians."

The young detective had not finished speaking when they reached the magistrate's office. Scarcely had Lecoq opened the door than M. Segmuller and his clerk rose from their seats. They both read important intelligence in our hero's troubled face. "What is it?" eagerly asked the magistrate. Lecoq's sole response was to lay the pellet of bread upon M. Segmuller's desk. In an instant the magistrate had opened it, extracting from the centre a tiny slip of the thinnest tissue paper. This he unfolded, and smoothed upon the palm of his hand. As soon as he glanced at it, his brow contracted. "Ah! this note is written in cipher," he exclaimed, with a disappointed air.

"We must not lose patience," said Lecoq quietly. He took the slip of paper from the magistrate and read the numbers inscribed upon it. They ran as follows: "235, 15, 3, 8, 25, 2, 16, 208, 5, 360, 4, 36, 19, 7, 14, 118, 84, 23, 9, 40, 11, 99."

"And so we shall learn nothing from this note," murmured the governor.

"Why not?" the smiling clerk ventured to remark. "There is no system of cipher which can not be read with a little skill and patience; there are some people who make it their business."

"You are right," said Lecoq, approvingly. "And I, myself, once had the knack of it."

"What!" exclaimed the magistrate; "do you hope to find the key to this cipher?"

"With time, yes."

Lecoq was about to place the paper in his breast-pocket, when the magistrate begged him to examine it a little further. He did so; and after a while his face suddenly brightened. Striking his forehead with his open palm, he cried: "I've found it!"

An exclamation of incredulous surprise simultaneously escaped the magistrate, the governor, and the clerk.

"At least I think so," added Lecoq, more cautiously. "If I am not mistaken, the prisoner and his accomplice have adopted a very simple system called the double book-cipher. The correspondents first agree upon some particular book; and both obtain a copy of the same edition. When one desires to communicate with the other, he opens the book haphazard, and begins by writing the number of the page. Then he must find on the same page the words that will express his thoughts. If the first word he wishes to write is the twentieth on the page, he places number 20 after the number of the page; then he begins to count one, two, three, and so on, until he finds the next word he wishes to use. If this word happens to be the sixth, he writes the figure 6; and he continues so on till he has finished his letter. You see, now, how the correspondent who receives the note must begin. He finds the page indicated, and then each figure represents a word."

"Nothing could be clearer," said the magistrate, approvingly.

"If this note," pursued Lecoq, "had been exchanged between two persons at liberty, it would be folly to attempt its translation. This simple system is the only one which has completely baffled inquisitive efforts, simply because there is no way of ascertaining the book agreed upon. But in this instance such is not the case; May is a prisoner, and he has only one book in his possession, 'The Songs of Beranger.' Let this book be sent for—"

The governor of the Depot was actually enthusiastic. "I will run and fetch it myself," he interrupted.

But Lecoq, with a gesture, detained him. "Above all, sir," said he, "take care that May doesn't discover his book has been tampered with. If he has returned from his promenade, make some excuse to have him sent out of his cell again; and don't allow him to return there while we are using his book."

"Oh, trust me!" replied the governor, hastily leaving the room.

Less than a quarter of an hour afterward he returned, carrying in triumph a little volume in 32mo. With a trembling hand Lecoq turned to page 235, and began to count. The fifteenth word on the page was *'I';* the third afterward, *'have';* the eighth following, *'told';* the twenty-fifth, *'her';* the second, *'your';* the sixteenth, *'wishes.'* Hence, the meaning of those six numbers was: "I have told her your wishes."

The three persons who had witnessed this display of shrewdness could not restrain their admiration. "Bravo! Lecoq," exclaimed the magistrate. "I will no longer bet a hundred to one on May," thought the smiling clerk.

But Lecoq was still busily engaged in deciphering the missive, and soon, in a voice trembling with gratified vanity, he read the entire note aloud. It ran as follows: "I have told her your wishes; she submits. Our safety is assured; we are waiting your orders to act. Hope! Courage!"

XIX

YET what a disappointment it produced after the fever of anxiety and expectation that had seized hold of everybody present. This strange epistle furnished no clue whatever to the mystery; and the ray of hope that had sparkled for an instant in M. Segmuller's eyes speedily faded away. As for the versatile Goguet he returned with increased conviction to his former opinion, that the prisoner had the advantage over his accusers.

"How unfortunate," remarked the governor of the Depot, with a shade of sarcasm in his voice, "that so much trouble, and such marvelous penetration, should be wasted!"

"So you think, sir, that I have wasted my time!" rejoined Lecoq in a tone of angry banter, a scarlet flush mantling at the same time over his features. "Such is not my opinion. This scrap of paper undeniably proves that if any one has been mistaken as regards the prisoner's identity, it is certainly not I."

"Very well," was the reply. "M. Gevrol and myself may have been mistaken: no one is infallible. But have you learned anything more than you knew before? Have you made any progress?"

"Why, yes. Now that people know the prisoner is not what he pretends to be, instead of annoying and hampering me, perhaps they will assist us to discover who he really is."

Lecoq's tone, and his allusion to the difficulties he had encountered, cut the governor to the quick. The knowledge that the reproof was not altogether undeserved increased his resentment and determined him to bring this discussion with an inferior to an abrupt close. "You are right," said he, sarcastically. "This May must be a very great and illustrious personage. Only, my dear Monsieur Lecoq (for there is an only), do me the favor to explain how such an important personage could disappear, and the police not be advised of it? A man of rank, such as you suppose this prisoner to be, usually has a family, friends, relatives, proteges, and numerous connections; and yet not a single person has made any inquiry during the three weeks that this fellow May has been under my charge! Come, admit you never thought of that."

The governor had just advanced the only serious objection that could be found to the theory adopted by the prosecution. He was wrong, however, in supposing that Lecoq had failed to foresee it; for it had never once been out of the young detective's mind; and he had racked his brain again and again to find some satisfactory explanation. At the present moment he would undoubtedly have made some angry retort to the governor's sneering criticism, as people are wont to do when their antagonists discover the weak spot in their armor, had not M. Segmuller opportunely intervened.

"All these recriminations do no good," he remarked, calmly; "we can make no progress while they continue. It would be much wiser to decide upon the course that is now to be pursued."

Thus reminded of the present situation of affairs, the young detective smiled; all his rancor was forgotten. "There is, I think, but one course to pursue," he replied in a modest tone; "and I believe it will be successful by reason of its simplicity. We must substitute a communication of our own composition for this one. That will not be at all difficult, since I have the key to the cipher. I shall only be obliged to purchase a similar volume of Beranger's songs; and May, believing that he is addressing his accomplice, will reply in all sincerity—will reveal everything perhaps—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the governor, "but how will you obtain possession of his reply?"

"Ah! you ask me too much. I know the way in which his letters have reached him. For the rest, I will watch and find a way—never fear!"

Goguet, the smiling clerk, could not conceal an approving grin. If he had happened to have ten francs in his pocket just then he would have risked them all on Lecoq without a moment's hesitation.

"First," resumed the young detective, "I will replace this missive by one of my own composition. To-morrow, at breakfast time, if the prisoner gives the signal, Father Absinthe shall throw the morsel of bread enclosing my note through the window while I watch the effect through the hole in the ceiling of the cell."

Lecoq was so delighted with this plan of his that he at once rang the bell, and when the magistrate's messenger appeared, he gave him half a franc and requested him to go at once and purchase some of the thinnest tissue paper. When this had been procured, Lecoq took his seat at the clerk's desk, and, provided with the volume of Beranger's songs, began to compose a fresh note, copying as closely as possible the forms of the figures used by the unknown correspondent. The task did not occupy him more than ten minutes, for, fearing lest he might commit some blunder, he reproduced most of the words of the original letter, giving them, however, an entirely different meaning.

When completed, his note read as follows: "I have told her your wishes; she does not submit. Our safety is threatened. We are awaiting your orders. I tremble."

Having acquainted the magistrate with the purport of the note, Lecoq next rolled up the paper, and enclosing it in the

fragment of bread, remarked: "To-morrow we shall learn something new."

To-morrow! The twenty-four hours that separated the young man from the decisive moment he looked forward to seemed as it were a century; and he resorted to every possible expedient to hasten the passing of the time. At length, after giving precise instructions to Father Absinthe, he retired to his loft for the night. The hours seemed interminable, and such was his nervous excitement that he found it quite impossible to sleep. On rising at daybreak he discovered that the prisoner was already awake. May was sitting on the foot of his bed, apparently plunged in thought. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and paced restlessly to and fro. He was evidently in an unusually agitated frame of mind: for he gesticulated wildly, and at intervals repeated: "What misery! My God! what misery!"

"Ah! my fine fellow," thought Lecoq, "you are anxious about the daily letter you failed to receive yesterday. Patience, patience! One of my writing will soon arrive."

At last the young detective heard the stir usually preceding the distribution of the food. People were running to and fro, sabots clicked noisily in the corridors, and the keepers could be heard engaged in loud conversation. By and by the prison bell began to toll. It was eleven o'clock, and soon afterward the prisoner commenced to sing his favorite song:

"Diogene!
Sous ton manteau, libre et content—"

Before he commenced the third line the slight sound caused by the fragment of bread as it fell upon the stone floor caused him to pause abruptly.

Lecoq, at the opening in the ceiling above, was holding his breath and watching with both eyes. He did not miss one of the prisoner's movements—not so much as the quiver of an eyelid. May looked first at the window, and then all round the cell, as if it were impossible for him to explain the arrival of this projectile. It was not until some little time had elapsed that he decided to pick it up. He held it in the hollow of his hand, and examined it with apparent curiosity. His features expressed intense surprise, and any one would have sworn that he was innocent of all complicity. Soon a smile gathered round his lips, and after a slight shrug of the shoulders, which might be interpreted, "Am I a fool?" he hastily broke the pellet in

half. The sight of the paper which it contained seemed to amaze him.

"What does all this mean?" wondered Lecoq.

The prisoner had opened the note, and was examining with knitted brows the figures which were apparently destitute of all meaning to him. Then, suddenly rushing to the door of his cell, and hammering upon it with clenched fists, he cried at the top of his voice: "Here! keeper! here!"

"What do you want?" shouted a turnkey, whose footsteps Lecoq could hear hastening along the adjoining passage.

"I wish to speak to the magistrate."

"Very well. He shall be informed."

"Immediately, if you please. I have a revelation to make."

"He shall be sent for immediately."

Lecoq waited to hear no more. He tore down the narrow staircase leading from the loft, and rushed to the Palais de Justice to acquaint M. Segmuller with what had happened.

"What can all this mean?" he wondered as he darted over the pavement. "Are we indeed approaching a denouement? This much is certain, the prisoner was not deceived by my note. He could only decipher it with the aid of his volume of Beranger, and he did not even touch the book; plainly, then, he hasn't read the letter."

M. Segmuller was no less amazed than the young detective. They both hastened to the prison, followed by the smiling clerk, who was the magistrate's inevitable shadow. On their way they encountered the governor of the Depot, arriving all in a flutter, having been greatly excited by that important word "revelation." The worthy official undoubtedly wished to express an opinion, but the magistrate checked him by the abrupt remark, "I know all about it, and I am coming."

When they had reached the narrow corridor leading to the secret cells, Lecoq passed on in advance of the rest of the party. He said to himself that by stealing upon the prisoner unawares he might possibly find him engaged in surreptitiously reading the note. In any case, he would have an opportunity to glance at the interior of the cell. May was seated beside the table, his head resting on his hands. At the grating of the bolt, drawn by the governor himself, the prisoner rose to his feet, smoothed his hair, and remained standing in a respectful attitude, apparently waiting for the visitors to address him.

"Did you send for me?" inquired the magistrate.

"Yes, sir."

"You have, I understand, some revelation to make to me."

"I have something of importance to tell you."

"Very well! these gentlemen will retire."

M. Segmuller had already turned to Lecoq and the governor to request them to withdraw, when the prisoner motioned him not to do so.

"It is not necessary," said May, "I am, on the contrary, very well pleased to speak before these gentlemen."

"Speak, then."

May did not wait for the injunction to be repeated. Throwing his chest forward, and his head back as had been his wont throughout his examinations, whenever he wished to make an oratorical display, he began as follows: "It shall be for you to say, gentlemen, whether I'm an honest man or not. The profession matters little. One may, perhaps, act as the clown of a traveling show, and yet be an honest man—a man of honor."

"Oh, spare us your reflections!"

"Very well, sir, that suits me exactly. To be brief, then, here is a little paper which was thrown into my cell a few minutes ago. There are some numbers on it which may mean something; but I have examined them, and they are quite Greek to me."

He paused, and then handing Lecoq's missive to the magistrate, quietly added: "It was rolled up in a bit of bread."

This declaration was so unexpected, that it struck all the officials dumb with surprise, but the prisoner, without seeming to notice the effect he had produced, placidly continued: "I suppose the person who threw it, made a mistake in the window. I know very well that it's a mean piece of business to denounce a companion in prison. It's a cowardly act and one may get into trouble by doing so; still, a fellow must be prudent when he's charged with murder as I am, and with something very unpleasant, perhaps, in store for him."

A terribly significant gesture of severing the head from the body left no doubt whatever as to what May meant by the "something very unpleasant."

"And yet I am innocent," continued May, in a sorrowful, reproachful tone.

The magistrate had by this time recovered the full possession of his faculties. Fixing his eyes upon the prisoner and concentrating in one magnetic glance all his power of will,

he slowly exclaimed: "You speak falsely! It was for you that this note was intended."

"For me! Then I must be the greatest of fools, or why should I have sent for you to show it you? For me? In that case, why didn't I keep it? Who knew, who could know that I had received it?"

These words were uttered with such a marvelous semblance of honesty, May's gaze was frank and open, his voice rang so true, and his reasoning was so specious, that all the governor's doubts returned.

"And what if I could prove that you are uttering a falsehood?" insisted M. Segmuller. "What if I could prove it—here and now?"

"You would have to lie to do so! Oh! pardon! Excuse me; I mean—"

But the magistrate was not in a frame of mind to stickle for nicety of expression. He motioned May to be silent; and, turning to Lecoq, exclaimed: "Show the prisoner that you have discovered the key to his secret correspondence."

A sudden change passed over May's features. "Ah! it is this agent of police who says the letter was for me," he remarked in an altered tone. "The same agent who asserts that *I* am a grand seigneur." Then, looking disdainfully at Lecoq, he added: "Under these circumstances there's no hope for me. When the police are absolutely determined that a man shall be found guilty, they contrive to prove his guilt; everybody knows that. And when a prisoner receives no letters, an agent, who wishes to show that he is corresponding knows well enough how to write to him."

May's features wore such an expression of marked contempt that Lecoq could scarcely refrain from making an angry reply. He restrained his impulse, however, in obedience to a warning gesture from the magistrate, and taking from the table the volume of Beranger's songs, he endeavored to prove to the prisoner that each number in the note which he had shown M. Segmuller corresponded with a word on the page indicated, and that these various words formed several intelligible phrases. This overpowering evidence did not seem to trouble May in the least. After expressing the same admiration for this novel system of correspondence that a child would show for a new toy, he declared his belief that no one could equal the police in such machinations.

What could have been done in the face of such obstinacy? M. Segmuller did not even attempt to argue the point, but quietly retired, followed by his companions. Until they reached the governor's office, he did not utter a word; then, sinking down into an armchair, he exclaimed: "We must confess ourselves beaten. This man will always remain what he is—an inexplicable enigma."

"But what is the meaning of the comedy he has just played? I do not understand it at all," remarked the governor.

"Why," replied Lecoq, "don't you see that he wished to persuade the magistrate that the first note, the one that fell into the cell while you and I were there yesterday, had been written by me in a mad desire to prove the truth of my theory at any cost? It was a hazardous project; but the importance of the result to be gained must have emboldened him to attempt it. Had he succeeded, I should have been disgraced; and he would have remained May—the stroller, without any further doubt as to his identity. But how could he know that I had discovered his secret correspondence, and that I was watching him from the loft overhead? That will probably never be explained."

The governor and the young detective exchanged glances of mutual distrust. "Eh! eh!" thought the former, "yes, indeed, that note which fell into the cell while I was there the other day might after all have been this crafty fellow's work. His Father Absinthe may have served him in the first instance just as he did subsequently."

While these reflections were flitting through the governor's mind, Lecoq suspiciously remarked to himself: "Who knows but what this fool of a governor confided everything to Gevrol? If he did so, the General, jealous as he is, would not have scrupled to play one such a damaging trick."

His thoughts had gone no further when Goguet, the smiling clerk, boldly broke the silence with the trite remark: "What a pity such a clever comedy didn't succeed."

These words startled the magistrate from his reverie. "Yes, a shameful farce," said he, "and one I would never have authorized, had I not been blinded by a mad longing to arrive at the truth. Such tricks only bring the sacred majesty of justice into contempt!"

At these bitter words, Lecoq turned white with anger. This was the second affront within an hour. The prisoner had first insulted him, and now it was the magistrate's turn. "I

am defeated," thought he. "I must confess it. Fate is against me! Ah! if I had only succeeded!"

Disappointment alone had impelled M. Segmuller to utter these harsh words; they were both cruel and unjust, and the magistrate soon regretted them, and did everything in his power to drive them from Lecoq's recollection. They met every day after this unfortunate incident; and every morning, when the young detective came to give an account of his investigations, they had a long conference together. For Lecoq still continued his efforts; still labored on with an obstinacy intensified by constant sneers; still pursued his investigations with that cold and determined zeal which keeps one's faculties on the alert for years.

The magistrate, however, was utterly discouraged. "We must abandon this attempt," said he. "All the means of detection have been exhausted. I give it up. The prisoner will go to the Assizes, to be acquitted or condemned under the name of May. I will trouble myself no more about the matter."

He said this, but the anxiety and disappointment caused by defeat, sneering criticism, and perplexity, as to the best course to be pursued, so affected his health that he became really ill—so ill that he had to take to his bed.

He had been confined to his room for a week or so, when one morning Lecoq called to inquire after him.

"You see, my good fellow," quoth M. Segmuller, despondently, "that this mysterious murderer is fatal to us magistrates. Ah! he is too much for us; he will preserve the secret of his identity."

"Possibly," replied Lecoq. "At all events, there is now but one way left to discover his secret; we must allow him to escape—and then track him to his lair."

This expedient, although at first sight a very startling one, was not of Lecoq's own invention, nor was it by any means novel. At all times, in cases of necessity, have the police closed their eyes and opened the prison doors for the release of suspected criminals. And not a few, dazzled by liberty and ignorant of being watched, have foolishly betrayed themselves. All prisoners are not like the Marquis de Lavalette, protected by royal connivance; and one might enumerate many individuals who have been released, only to be rearrested after confessing their guilt to police spies or auxiliaries who have won their confidence.

Naturally, however, it is but seldom, and only in special cases, and as a last resort, that such a plan is adopted. Moreover, the authorities only consent to it when they hope to derive some important advantage, such as the capture of a whole band of criminals. For instance, the police perhaps arrest one of a band. Now, despite his criminal propensities the captured culprit often has a certain sense of honor—we all know that there is honor among thieves—which prompts him to refuse all information concerning his accomplices. In such a case what is to be done? Is he to be sent to the Assizes by himself, tried and convicted, while his comrades escape scot free? No; it is best to set him at liberty. The prison doors are opened, and he is told that he is free. But each after step he takes in the streets outside is dogged by skilful detectives; and soon, at the very moment when he is boasting of his good luck and audacity to the comrades he has rejoined, the whole gang find themselves caught in the snare.

M. Segmuller knew all this, and much more, and yet, on hearing Lecoq's proposition, he made an angry gesture and exclaimed: "Are you mad?"

"I think not, sir."

"At all events your scheme is a most foolish one!"

"Why so, sir? You will recollect the famous murder of the Chaboiseaus. The police soon succeeded in capturing the guilty parties; but a robbery of a hundred and sixty thousand francs in bank-notes and coin had been committed at the same time, and this large sum of money couldn't be found. The murderers obstinately refused to say where they had concealed it; for, of course, it would prove a fortune for them, if they ever escaped the gallows. In the mean while, however, the children of the victims were ruined. Now, M. Patrigent, the magistrate who investigated the affair, was the first to convince the authorities that it would be best to set one of the murderers at liberty. His advice was followed; and three days later the culprit was surprised unearthing the money from among a bed of mushrooms. Now, I believe that our prisoner—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "I wish to hear no more on the matter. I have, it seems to me, forbidden you to broach the subject."

The young detective hung his head with a hypocritical air of submission. But all the while he watched the magistrate out of the corner of his eye and noted his agitation. "I can

afford to be silent," he thought; "he will return to the subject of his own accord."

And in fact M. Segmuller did return to it only a moment afterward. "Suppose this man were released from prison," said he, "what would you do?"

"What would I do, sir! I would follow him like grim death; I would not once let him out of my sight; I would be his shadow."

"And do you suppose he wouldn't discover this surveillance?"

"I should take my precautions."

"But he would recognize you at a single glance."

"No, sir, he wouldn't, for I should disguise myself. A detective who can't equal the most skilful actor in the matter of make-up is no better than an ordinary policeman. I have only practised at it for a twelvemonth, but I can easily make myself look old or young, dark or light, or assume the manner of a man of the world, or of some frightful ruffian of the barrieres."

"I wasn't aware that you possessed this talent, Monsieur Lecoq."

"Oh! I'm very far from the perfection I hope to arrive at; though I may venture to say that in three days from now I could call on you and talk with you for half an hour without being recognized."

M. Segmuller made no rejoinder; and it was evident to Lecoq that the magistrate had offered this objection rather in the hope of its being overruled, than with the wish to see it prevail.

"I think, my poor fellow," he at length observed, "that you are strangely deceived. We have both been equally anxious to penetrate the mystery that enshrouds this strange man. We have both admired his wonderful acuteness—for his sagacity *is* wonderful; so marvelous, indeed, that it exceeds the limits of imagination. Do you believe that a man of his penetration would betray himself like an ordinary prisoner? He will understand at once, if he is set at liberty, that his freedom is only given him so that we may surprise his secret."

"I don't deceive myself, sir. May will guess the truth of course. I'm quite aware of that."

"Very well. Then, what would be the use of attempting what you propose?"

"I have come to this conclusion," replied Lecoq, "May will find himself strangely embarrassed, even when he's set free.

He won't have a sou in his pocket; we know he has no trade, so what will he do to earn a living? He may struggle along for a while; but he won't be willing to suffer long. Man must have food and shelter, and when he finds himself without a roof over his head, without even a crust of bread to break, he will remember that he is rich. Won't he then try to recover possession of his property? Yes, certainly he will. He will try to obtain money, endeavor to communicate with his friends, and I shall wait till that moment arrives. Months may elapse, before, seeing no signs of my surveillance, he may venture on some decisive step; and then I will spring forward with a warrant for his arrest in my hand."

"And what if he should leave Paris? What if he should go abroad?"

"Oh, I will follow him. One of my aunts has left me a little land in the provinces worth about twelve thousand francs. I will sell it, and spend the last sou, if necessary, so long as I only have my revenge. This man has outwitted me as if I were a child, and I must have my turn."

"And what if he should slip through your fingers?"

Lecoq laughed like a man that was sure of himself. "Let him try," he exclaimed; "I will answer for him with my life."

"Your idea is not a bad one," said M. Segmuller, eventually. "But you must understand that law and justice will take no part in such intrigues. All I can promise you is my tacit approval. Go, therefore, to the Prefecture; see your superiors—"

With a really despairing gesture, the young man interrupted M. Segmuller. "What good would it do for *me* to make such a proposition?" he exclaimed. "They would not only refuse my request, but they would dismiss me on the spot, if my name is not already erased from the roll."

"What, dismissed, after conducting this case so well?"

"Ah, sir, unfortunately every one is not of that opinion. Tongues have been wagging busily during your illness. Somehow or other, my enemies have heard of the last scene we had with May; and impudently declare that it was *I* who imagined all the romantic details of this affair, being eager for advancement. They pretend that the only reasons to doubt the prisoner's identity are those I have invented myself. To hear them talk at the Depot, one might suppose that I invented the scene in the Widow Chupin's cabin; imagined the accomplices; suborned the witnesses; manufactured the articles of convic-

tion; wrote the first note in cipher as well as the second; duped Father Absinthe, and mystified the governor."

"The deuce!" exclaimed M. Segmuller; "in that case, what do they think of me?"

The wily detective's face assumed an expression of intense embarrassment.

"Ah! sir," he replied with a great show of reluctance, "they pretend that you have allowed yourself to be deceived by me, and that you haven't weighed at their proper worth the proofs I've furnished."

A fleeting flush mantled over M. Segmuller's forehead. "In a word," said he, "they think I'm your dupe—and a fool besides."

The recollection of certain sarcastic smiles he had often detected on the faces of colleagues and subordinates alike, the memory of numerous covert allusions to Casper Hauser, and the Man with the Iron Mask—allusions which had stung him to the quick—induced him to hesitate no longer.

"Very well! I will aid you, Monsieur Lecoq," he exclaimed. "I should like you to triumph over your enemies. I will get up at once and accompany you to the Palais de Justice. I will see the public prosecutor myself; I will speak to him, and plead your case for you."

Lecoq's joy was intense. Never, no never, had he dared to hope for such assistance. Ah! after this he would willingly go through fire on M. Segmuller's behalf. And yet, despite his inward exultation, he had sufficient control over his feelings to preserve a sober face. This victory must be concealed under penalty of forfeiting the benefits that might accrue from it. Certainly, the young detective had said nothing that was untrue; but there are different ways of presenting the truth, and he had, perhaps, exaggerated a trifle in order to excite the magistrate's rancor, and win his needful assistance.

"I suppose," remarked M. Segmuller, who was now quite calm again—no outward sign of wounded vanity being perceptible—"I suppose you have decided what stratagem must be employed to lull the prisoner's suspicions if he is permitted to escape."

"I must confess I haven't given it a thought," replied Lecoq. "Besides, what good would any such stratagem do? He knows too well that he is the object of suspicion not to remain on the alert. Still, there is one precaution which I believe absolutely necessary, indispensable indeed, if we wish to be successful."

"What precaution do you mean?" inquired the magistrate.

"Well, sir, I think an order should be given to have May transferred to another prison. It doesn't in the least matter which; you can select the one you please."

"Why should we do that?"

"Because, during the few days preceding his release, it is absolutely necessary he should hold no communication with his friends outside, and that he should be unable to warn his accomplice."

"Then you think he's badly guarded where he is?" inquired M. Segmuller with seeming amazement.

"No, sir, I did not say that. I am satisfied that since the affair of the cipher note the governor's vigilance has been unimpeachable. However, news from outside certainly reaches the suspected murderer at the Depot; we have had material evidence—full proof of that—and besides—"

The young detective paused in evident embarrassment. He plainly had some idea in his head to which he feared to give expression.

"And besides?" repeated the magistrate.

"Ah, well, sir! I will be perfectly frank with you. I find that Gevrol enjoys too much liberty at the Depot; he is perfectly at home there, he comes and goes as he likes, and no one ever thinks of asking what he is doing, where he is going, or what he wants. No pass is necessary for his admission, and he can influence the governor just as he likes. Now, to tell the truth, I distrust Gevrol."

"Oh! Monsieur Lecoq!"

"Yes, I know very well that it's a bold accusation, but a man is not master of his presentiments: so there it is, I distrust Gevrol. Did the prisoner know that I was watching him from the loft, and that I had discovered his secret correspondence, was he ignorant of it? To my mind he evidently knew everything, as the last scene we had with him proves."

"I must say that's my own opinion," interrupted M. Segmuller.

"But how could he have known it?" resumed Lecoq. "He could not have discovered it by himself. I endured tortures for a while in the hope of solving the problem. But all my trouble was wasted. Now the supposition of Gevrol's intervention would explain everything."

M. Segmuller had turned pale with anger. "Ah! if I could

really believe that!" he exclaimed; "if I were sure of it! Have you any proofs?"

The young man shook his head. "No," said he, "I haven't; but even if my hands were full of proofs I should not dare to show them. I should ruin my future. Ah, if ever I succeed, I must expect many such acts of treachery. There is hatred and rivalry in every profession. And, mark this, sir—I don't doubt Gevrol's honesty. If a hundred thousand francs were counted out upon the table and offered to him, he wouldn't even try to release a prisoner. But he would rob justice of a dozen criminals in the mere hope of injuring me, jealous as he is, and fearing lest I might obtain advancement."

How many things these simple words explained. Did they not give the key to many and many an enigma which justice has failed to solve, simply on account of the jealousy and rivalry that animate the detective force? Thus thought M. Segmuller, but he had no time for further reflection.

"That will do," said he, "go into the drawing-room for a moment. I will dress and join you there. I will send for a cab: for we must make haste if I am to see the public prosecutor to-day."

Less than a quarter of an hour afterward M. Segmuller, who usually spent considerable time over his toilet, was dressed and ready to start. He and Lecoq were just getting into the cab that had been summoned when a footman in a stylish livery was seen approaching.

"Ah! Jean," exclaimed the magistrate, "how's your master?"

"Improving, sir," was the reply. "He sent me to ask how you were, and to inquire how that affair was progressing?"

"There has been no change since I last wrote to him. Give him my compliments, and tell him that I am out again."

The servant bowed. Lecoq took a seat beside the magistrate and the cab started off.

"That fellow is one of D'Escorval's servants," remarked M. Segmuller. "He's richer than I, and can well afford to keep a footman."

"D'Escorval's," ejaculated Lecoq, "the magistrate who—"

"Precisely. He sent his man to me two or three days ago to ascertain what we were doing with our mysterious May."

"Then M. d'Escorval is interested in the case?"

"Prodigiously! I conclude it is because he opened the prosecution, and because the case rightfully belongs to him. Perhaps

he regrets that it passed out of his hands, and thinks that he could have managed the investigation better himself. We would have done better with it if we could. I would give a good deal to see him in my place."

But this change would not have been at all to Lecoq's taste. "Ah," thought he, "such a fellow as D'Escorval would never have shown me such confidence as M. Segmuller." He had, indeed, good reason to congratulate himself: for that very day M. Segmuller, who was a man of his word, a man who never rested until he had carried his plan into execution, actually induced the authorities to allow May to be set at liberty; and the details of this measure only remained to be decided upon. As regards the proposed transfer of the suspected murderer to another prison, this was immediately carried into effect, and May was removed to Mazas, where Lecoq had no fear of Gevrol's interference.

That same afternoon, moreover, the Widow Chupin received her conditional release. There was no difficulty as regards her son, Polyte. He had, in the mean time, been brought before the correctional court on a charge of theft; and, to his great astonishment, had heard himself sentenced to thirteen months' imprisonment. After this, M. Segmuller had nothing to do but to wait, and this was the easier as the advent of the Easter holidays gave him an opportunity to seek a little rest and recreation with his family in the provinces.

On the day he returned to Paris—the last of the recess, and by chance a Sunday—he was sitting alone in his library when his cook came to tell him that there was a man in the vestibule who had been sent from a neighboring register office to take the place of a servant he had recently dismissed. The newcomer was ushered into the magistrate's presence and proved to be a man of forty or thereabouts, very red in the face and with carroty hair and whiskers. He was, moreover, strongly inclined to corpulence, and was clad in clumsy, ill-fitting garments. In a complacent tone, and with a strong Norman accent, he informed the magistrate that during the past twenty years he had been in the employment of various literary men, as well as of a physician, and notary; that he was familiar with the duties that would be required of him at the Palais de Justice, and that he knew how to dust papers without disarranging them. In short, he produced such a favorable impression that, although M. Segmuller reserved twenty-four hours in

which to make further inquiries, he drew a twenty-franc piece from his pocket on the spot and tendered it to the Norman valet as the first instalment of his wages.

But instead of pocketing the proffered coin, the man, with a sudden change of voice and attitude, burst into a hearty laugh, exclaiming: "Do you think, sir, that May will recognize me?"

"Monsieur Lecoq!" cried the astonished magistrate.

"The same, sir; and I have come to tell you that if you are ready to release May, all my arrangements are now completed."

XX

WHEN one of the investigating magistrates of the Tribunal of the Seine wishes to examine a person confined in one of the Paris prisons, he sends by his messenger to the governor of that particular jail a so-called "order of extraction," a concise, imperative formula, which reads as follows: "The keeper of —— prison will give into the custody of the bearer of this order the prisoner known as ——, in order that he may be brought before us in our cabinet at the Palais de Justice." No more, no less, a signature, a seal, and everybody is bound to obey.

But from the moment of receiving this order until the prisoner is again incarcerated, the governor of the prison is relieved of all responsibility. Whatever may happen, his hands are clear. Minute precautions are taken, however, so that a prisoner may not escape during his journey from the prison to the Palais. He is carefully locked up in a compartment of one of the lugubrious vehicles that may be often seen waiting on the Quai de l'Horloge, or in the courtyard of the Sainte-Chapelle. This van conveys him to the Palais, and while he is awaiting examination, he is immured in one of the cells of the gloomy jail, familiarly known as "la Souriciere" or the "mouse-trap." On entering and leaving the van the prisoner is surrounded by guards: and on the road, in addition to the mounted troopers who always accompany these vehicles, there are prison warders or linesmen of the Gard de Paris installed

in the passage between the compartments of the van and seated on the box with the driver. Hence, the boldest criminals ordinarily realize the impossibility of escaping from this ambulatory prison.

Indeed, statistics record only thirty attempts at escape in a period of ten years. Of these thirty attempts, twenty-five were ridiculous failures; four were discovered before their authors had conceived any serious hope of success: and only one man actually succeeded in alighting from the vehicle, and even he had not taken fifty steps before he was recaptured.

Lecoq was well acquainted with all these facts, and in preparing everything for May's escape, his only fear was lest the murderer might decline to profit of the opportunity. Hence, it was necessary to offer every possible inducement for flight. The plan the young detective had eventually decided on consisted in sending an order to Mazas for May to be despatched to the Palais de Justice. He could be placed in one of the prison vans, and at the moment of starting the door of his compartment would not be perfectly secured. When the van reached the Palais de Justice and discharged its load of criminals at the door of the "mouse-trap" May would purposely be forgotten and left in the vehicle, while the latter waited on the Quai de l'Horloge until the hour of returning to Mazas. It was scarcely possible that the prisoner would fail to embrace this apparently favorable opportunity to make his escape.

Everything was, therefore, prepared and arranged according to Lecoq's directions on the Monday following the close of the Easter holidays; the requisite "order of extraction" being entrusted to an intelligent man with the most minute instructions.

Now, although the van in which May would journey was not to be expected at the Palais de Justice before noon, it so happened that at nine o'clock that same morning a queer-looking "loafer" having the aspect of an overgrown, overaged "gamin de Paris" might have been seen hanging about the Prefecture de Police. He wore a tattered black woolen blouse and a pair of wide, ill-fitting trousers, fastened about his waist by a leather strap. His boots betrayed a familiar acquaintance with the puddles of the barrieres, and his cap was shabby and dirty, though, on the other hand, his necktie, a pretentious silk scarf of flaming hue, was evidently quite fresh from some haberdasher's shop. No doubt it was a present from his sweetheart.

This uncomely being had the unhealthy complexion, hollow eyes, slouching mien, and straggling beard common to his tribe. His yellow hair, cut closely at the back of the head, as if to save the trouble of brushing, was long in front and at the sides; being plastered down over his forehead and advancing above his ears in extravagant corkscrew ringlets.

What with his attire, his affected jaunty step, his alternate raising of either shoulder, and his way of holding his cigarette and of ejecting a stream of saliva from between his teeth, Polyte Chupin, had he been at liberty, would undoubtedly have proffered a paw, and greeted this barriere beauty as a "pal."

It was the 14th of April; the weather was lovely, and, on the horizon, the youthful foliage of the chestnut trees in the Tuileries gardens stood out against a bright blue sky. The "ethereal mildness" of "gentle spring" seemed to have a positive charm for the tattered "loafer" who lazily loitered in the sunlight, dividing his attention between the passers-by and some men who were hauling sand from the banks of the Seine. Occasionally, however, he crossed the roadway, and, strange to say, exchanged a few remarks with a neatly dressed, long-bearded gentleman, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles over his nose and drab silk gloves on his hands. This individual exhibited all the outward characteristics of eminent respectability, and seemed to take a remarkable interest in the contents of an optician's shop window.

Every now and then a policeman or an agent of the detective corps passed by on his way to the Prefecture, and the elderly gentleman or the "loafer" would at times run after these officials to ask for some trifling information. The person addressed replied and passed on; and then the "loafer" and the gentleman would join each other and laughingly exclaim: "Good!—there's another who doesn't recognize us."

And in truth the pair had just cause for exultation, good reason to be proud, for of some twelve or fifteen comrades they accosted, not one recognized the two detectives, Lecoq and Father Absinthe. For the "loafer" was none other than our hero, and the gentleman of such eminent respectability his faithful lieutenant.

"Ah!" quoth the latter with admiration, "I am not surprised they don't recognize me, since I can't recognize myself. No one but you, Monsieur Lecoq, could have so transformed me."

Unfortunately for Lecoq's vanity, the good fellow spoke at

a moment when the time for idle conversation had passed. The prison van was just crossing the bridge at a brisk trot.

"Attention!" exclaimed the young detective, "there comes our friend! Quick!—to your post; remember my directions, and keep your eyes open!"

Near them, on the quay, was a large pile of timber, behind which Father Absinthe immediately concealed himself, while Lecoq, seizing a spade that was lying idle, hurried to a little distance and began digging in the sand. They did well to make haste. The van came onward and turned the corner. It passed the two detectives, and with a noisy clang rolled under the heavy arch leading to "la Souriciere." May was inside, as Lecoq assured himself on recognizing the keeper sitting beside the driver.

The van remained in the courtyard for more than a quarter of an hour. When it reappeared, the driver had left his perch and the quay opposite the Palais de Justice, threw a covering over his horses, lighted his pipe, and quietly walked away. The moment for action was now swiftly approaching.

For a few minutes the anxiety of the two watchers amounted to actual agony; nothing stirred—nothing moved. But at last the door of the van was opened with infinite caution, and a pale, frightened face became visible. It was the face of May. The prisoner cast a rapid glance around him. No one was in sight. Then as swiftly and as stealthily as a cat he sprang to the ground, noiselessly closed the door of the vehicle, and walked quietly toward the bridge.

Lecoq breathed again. He had been asking himself if some trifling circumstance could have been forgotten or neglected, thus disarranging all his plans. He had been wondering if this strange man would refuse the dangerous liberty which had been offered him. But he had been anxious without cause. May had fled; not thoughtlessly, but with premeditation.

From the moment when he was left alone, apparently forgotten, in the insecurely locked compartment, until he opened the door and glanced around him, sufficient time had elapsed for a man of his intellect and discernment to analyze and calculate all the chances of so grave a step. Hence, if he had stepped into the snare laid for him, it must be with a full knowledge of the risks he had to run. He and Lecoq were alone together, free in the streets of Paris, armed with mutual distrust, equally obliged to resort to strategy, and forced to

hide from each other. Lecoq, it is true, had an auxiliary—Father Absinthe. But who could say that May would not be aided by his redoubtable accomplice? Hence, it was a veritable duel, the result of which depended entirely upon the courage, skill, and coolness of the antagonists.

All these thoughts flashed through the young detective's brain with the quickness of lightning. Throwing down his spade, and running toward a sergeant de ville, who was just coming out of the Palais de Justice, he gave him a letter which was ready in his pocket. "Take this to M. Segmuller at once; it is a matter of importance," said he.

The policeman attempted to question this "loafer" who was in correspondence with the magistrates; but Lecoq had already darted off on the prisoner's trail.

May had covered but a short distance. He was sauntering along with his hands in his pockets; his head high in the air, his manner composed and full of assurance. Had he reflected that it would be dangerous to run while so near the prison from which he had just escaped? Or was he of opinion that as an opportunity of flight had been willingly furnished him, there was no danger of immediate rearrest? This was a point Lecoq could not decide. At all events, May showed no signs of quickening his pace even after crossing the bridge; and it was with the same tranquil manner that he next crossed the Quai aux Fleurs and turned into the Rue de la Cite.

Nothing in his bearing or appearance proclaimed him to be an escaped prisoner. Since his trunk—that famous trunk which he pretended to have left at the Hotel de Mariembourg—had been returned to him, he had been well supplied with clothing: and he never failed, when summoned before the magistrate, to array himself in his best apparel. The garments he wore that day were black cloth, and their cut, combined with his manner, gave him the appearance of a working man of the better class taking a holiday.

His tread, hitherto firm and decided, suddenly became uncertain when, after crossing the Seine, he reached the Rue St. Jacques. He walked more slowly, frequently hesitated, and glanced continually at the shops on either side of the way.

"Evidently he is seeking something," thought Lecoq: "but what?"

It was not long before he ascertained. Seeing a second-hand-clothes shop close by, May entered in evident haste. Lecoq at

once stationed himself under a gateway on the opposite side of the street, and pretended to be busily engaged lighting a cigarette. The criminal being momentarily out of sight, Father Absinthe thought he could approach without danger.

"Ah, well," said he, "there's our man changing his fine clothes for coarser garments. He will ask for the difference in money; and they will give it him. You told me this morning: 'May without a sou'—that's the trump card in our game!"

"Nonsense! Before we begin to lament, let us wait and see what happens. It is not likely that shopkeeper will give him any money. He won't buy clothing of the first passer-by."

Father Absinthe withdrew to a little distance. He distrusted these reasons, but not Lecoq who gave them.

In the mean while, in his secret soul, Lecoq was cursing himself. Another blunder, thought he, another weapon left in the hands of the enemy. How was it that he, who fancied himself so shrewd, had not foreseen this emergency? Calmness of mind returned, however, a moment afterward when he saw May emerge from the shop attired as when he entered it. Luck had for once been in the young detective's favor.

May actually staggered when he stepped out on the pavement. His bitter disappointment could be read in his countenance, which disclosed the anguish of a drowning man who sees the frail plank which was his only hope of salvation snatched from his grasp by the ruthless waves.

What could have taken place? This Lecoq must know without a moment's delay. He gave a peculiar whistle, to warn his companion that he momentarily abandoned the pursuit of him; and having received a similar signal in response, he entered the shop. The owner was still standing behind the counter. Lecoq wasted no time in parleying. He merely showed his card to acquaint the man with his profession, and curtly asked: "What did the fellow want who was just in here?"

The shopkeeper seemed embarrassed. "It's a long story," he stammered.

"Then tell it!" said Lecoq, surprised at the man's hesitation.

"Oh, it's very simple. About twelve days ago a man entered my shop with a bundle under his arm. He claimed to be a countryman of mine."

"Are you an Alsatian?"

"Yes, sir. Well, I went with this man to the wine-shop at

the corner, where he ordered a bottle of good wine; and while we drank together, he asked me if I would consent to keep the package he had with him until one of his cousins came to claim it. To prevent any mistake, this cousin was to say certain words—a countersign, as it were. I refused, shortly and decidedly, for the very month before I had got into trouble and had been charged with receiving stolen goods, all by obliging a person in this way. Well, you never saw a man so vexed and so surprised. What made me all the more determined in my refusal was that he offered me a good round sum in payment for my trouble. This only increased my suspicion, and I persisted in my refusal."

The shopkeeper paused to take breath; but Lecoq was on fire with impatience. "And what then?" he insisted.

"Well, he paid for the wine and went away. I had forgotten all about the matter until that man came in here just now, and after asking me if I hadn't a package for him, which had been left by one of his cousins, began to say some peculiar words—the countersign, no doubt. When I replied that I had nothing at all he turned as white as his shirt; and I thought he was going to faint. All my suspicions came back to me. So when he afterward proposed that I should buy his clothes, I told him I couldn't think of it."

All this was plain enough to Lecoq. "And this cousin who was here a fortnight ago, what was he like?" asked he.

"He was a tall, rather corpulent man, with a ruddy complexion, and white whiskers. Ah! I should recognize him in an instant!"

"The accomplice!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing that would interest you. Thank you. I am in a hurry. You will see me again: good morning."

Lecoq had not remained five minutes in the shop: and yet, when he emerged, May and Father Absinthe were nowhere in sight. Still, the young detective was not at all uneasy on that score. In making arrangements with his old colleague for this pursuit Lecoq had foreseen such a situation, and it had been agreed that if one of them were obliged to remain behind, the other, who was closely following May, should from time to time make chalk marks on the walls, shutters, and facings of the shops, so as to indicate the route, and enable his companion to rejoin him. Hence, in order to know which way to

go, Lecoq had only to glance at the buildings around him. The task was neither long nor difficult, for on the front of the third shop beyond that of the second-hand-clothes dealer a superb dash of the crayon instructed him to turn into the Rue Saint-Jacques.

On he rushed in that direction, his mind busy at work with the incident that had just occurred. What a terrible warning that old-clothes dealer's declaration had been! Ah! that mysterious accomplice was a man of foresight. He had even done his utmost to insure his comrade's salvation in the event of his being allowed to escape. What did the package the shopkeeper had spoken of contain? Clothes, no doubt. Everything necessary for a complete disguise—money, papers, a forged passport most likely.

While these thoughts were rushing through Lecoq's mind, he had reached the Rue Soufflot, where he paused for an instant to learn his way from the walls. This was the work of a second. A long chalk mark on a watchmaker's shop pointed to the Boulevard Saint-Michel, whither the young detective at once directed his steps. "The accomplice," said he to himself, resuming his meditation, "didn't succeed with that old-clothes dealer; but he isn't a man to be disheartened by one rebuff. He has certainly taken other measures. How shall I divine what they are in order to defeat them?"

The supposed murderer had crossed the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and had then taken to the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, as Father Absinthe's dashes of the crayon proclaimed with many eloquent flourishes.

"One circumstance reassures me," the young detective murmured, "May's going to this shop, and his consternation on finding that there was nothing for him there. The accomplice had informed him of his plans, but had *not* been able to inform him of their failure. Hence, from this hour, the prisoner is left to his own resources. The chain that bound him to his accomplice is broken; there is no longer an understanding between them. Everything depends now upon keeping them apart. Yes, everything lies in that!"

Ah! how Lecoq rejoiced that he had succeeded in having May transferred to another prison; for he was convinced that the accomplice had warned May of the attempt he was going to make with the old-clothes dealer on the very evening before May's removal to Mazas. Hence, it had not been possible to

acquaint him with the failure of this scheme or the substitution of another.

Still following the chalk marks, Lecoq now reached the Odeon theatre. Here were fresh signs, and what was more, Father Absinthe could be perceived under the colonnade, standing in front of one of the book-stalls, and apparently engrossed in the contemplation of a print.

Assuming the nonchalant manner of the loafer whose garb he wore, Lecoq took his stand beside his colleague. "Where is he?" asked the young detective.

"There," replied his companion, with a slight movement of his head in the direction of the steps.

The fugitive was, indeed, seated on one of the steps at the side of the theatre, his elbows resting on his knees and his face hidden in his hands, as if he felt the necessity of concealing the expression of his face from the passers-by. Undoubtedly, at that moment, he gave himself up for lost. Alone in the midst of Paris, without a penny, what was to become of him? He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was being watched; that his steps were being dogged, that the first attempt he made to inform his accomplice of his whereabouts would cost him his secret—the secret which he plainly held as more precious than life itself, and which, by immense sacrifices, he had so far been able to preserve.

Having for some short time contemplated in silence this unfortunate man whom after all he could but esteem and admire, Lecoq turned to his old companion: "What did he do on the way?" he asked.

"He went into the shops of five dealers in second-hand clothing without success. Then he addressed a man who was passing with a lot of old rubbish on his shoulder: but the man wouldn't even answer him."

Lecoq nodded his head thoughtfully. "The moral of this is, that there's a vast difference between theory and practise," he remarked. "Here's a fellow who has made some most discerning men believe that he's only a poor devil, a low buffoon. Well, now he's free; and this so-called Bohemian doesn't even know how to go to work to sell the clothes on his back. The comedian who could play his part so well on the stage has disappeared; while the man remains—the man who has always been rich, and knows nothing of the vicissitudes of life."

The young detective suddenly ceased moralizing, for May

had risen from his seat. Lecoq was only ten yards distant, and could see that his face was pallid. His attitude expressed profound dejection and one could read his indecision in his eyes. Perhaps he was wondering if it would not be best to return and place himself again in the hands of his jailers, since he was without the resources upon which he had depended.

After a little, however, he shook off the torpor that had for a time overpowered him; his eyes brightened, and, with a gesture of defiance, he left the steps, crossed the open square and walked down the Rue de l'Ancienne-Comedie. He strode onward now with the brisk, determined step of a man who has a definite aim in view.

"Who knows where he is going now?" murmured Father Absinthe, as he trotted along by Lecoq's side.

"I do," replied the young detective. "And the proof is, that I am going to leave you, and run on in advance, to prepare for his reception. I may be mistaken, however, and as we must be prepared for any emergency, leave me the chalk-marks as you go along. If our man doesn't come to the Hotel de Mariembourg, as I think he will, I shall come back here to start in pursuit of you again."

Just then an empty cab chanced to be passing, and Lecoq hastily got into it, telling the driver to take him to the Northern Railway Station by the shortest route and as quickly as possible. As time was precious, he handed the cabman his fare while on the road, and then began to search his pocket-book, among the various documents confided to him by M. Segmuller, for a particular paper he would now require.

Scarcely had the cab stopped at the Place de Roubaix than the young detective alighted and ran toward the Hotel de Mariembourg, where, as on the occasion of his first visit, he found Madame Milner standing on a chair in front of her bird-cage, obstinately trying to teach her starling German, while the bird with equal obstinacy repeated: "Camille! where is Camille?"

On perceiving the individual of questionable mien who had presumed to cross her threshold, the pretty widow did not deign to change her position.

"What do you want?" she asked in a curt, sharp voice.

"I am the nephew of a messenger at the Palais de Justice," replied Lecoq with an awkward bow, in perfect keeping with his attire. "On going to see my uncle this morning, I found

him laid up with rheumatism; and he asked me to bring you this paper in his stead. It is a summons for you to appear at once before the investigating magistrate."

This reply induced Madame Milner to abandon her perch. "Very well," she replied after glancing at the summons; "give me time to throw a shawl over my shoulder, and I'll start."

Lecoq withdrew with another awkward bow; but he had not reached the street before a significant grimace betrayed his inward satisfaction. She had duped him once, and now he had repaid her. On looking round him he perceived a half-built house at the corner of the Rue St. Quentin, and being momentarily in want of a hiding-place he concluded that he had best conceal himself there. The pretty widow had only asked for sufficient time to slip on a shawl before starting; but then it so happened that she was rather particular as to her personal appearance—and such a plump, attractive little body as herself, having an eye perhaps to renewed wedlock, could not possibly be expected to tie her bonnet strings in less than a quarter of an hour. Hence, Lecoq's sojourn behind the scaffolding of the half-built house proved rather longer than he had expected, and at the thought that May might arrive at any moment he fairly trembled with anxiety. How much was he in advance of the fugitive? Half an hour, perhaps! And he had accomplished only half his task.

At last, however, the coquettish landlady made her appearance as radiant as a spring morning. She probably wished to make up for the time she had spent over her toilet, for as she turned the corner she began to run. Lecoq waited till she was out of sight, and then bounding from his place of concealment, he burst into the Hotel de Mariembourg like a bombshell.

Fritz, the Bavarian lad, must have been warned that the house was to be left in his sole charge for some hours; for having comfortably installed himself in his mistress's own particular armchair, with his legs resting on another one, he had already commenced to fall asleep.

"Wake up!" shouted Lecoq; "wake up!"

At the sound of this voice, which rang like a trumpet blast, Fritz sprang to his feet, frightened half out of his wits.

"You see that I am an agent of the Prefecture of Police," said the visitor, showing his card. "Now, if you wish to avoid all sorts of disagreeable things, the least of which will be a sojourn in prison, you must obey me."

The boy trembled in every limb. "Yes, mein Herr—Monsieur, I mean—I will obey you," he stammered. "But what am I to do?"

"Oh, very little. A man is coming here in a moment: you will know him by his black clothes and his long beard. You must answer him word for word as I tell you. And remember, if you make any mistake, you will suffer for it."

"You may rely upon me, sir," replied Fritz. "I have an excellent memory."

The prospect of imprisonment had terrified him into abject submission. He spoke the truth; he would have been willing to say or do anything just then. Lecoq profited by this disposition; and then clearly and concisely gave the lad his instructions. "And now," added he, "I must see and hear you. Where can I hide myself?"

Fritz pointed to a glass door. "In the dark room there, sir. By leaving the door ajar you can hear and you can see everything through the glass."

Without another word Lecoq darted into the room in question. Not a moment too soon, however, for the spring bell of the outer door announced the arrival of a visitor. It was May. "I wish to speak to the landlady," he said.

"What landlady?" replied the lad.

"The person who received me when I came here six weeks ago—"

"Oh, I understand," interrupted Fritz; "it's Madame Milner you want to see; but you have come too late; she sold the house about a month ago, and has gone back to Alsace."

May stamped his foot and uttered a terrible oath. "I have come to claim something from her," he insisted.

"Do you want me to call her successor?"

Concealed behind the glass door, Lecoq could not help admiring Fritz, who was uttering these glaring falsehoods with that air of perfect candor which gives the Germans such a vast advantage over the Latin races, who seem to be lying even when they are telling the truth.

"Her successor would order me off," exclaimed May. "I came to reclaim the money I paid for a room I never occupied."

"Such money is never refunded."

May uttered some incoherent threat, in which such words as "downright robbery" and "justice" could be distinguished,

and then abruptly walked back into the street, slamming the door behind him.

"Well! did I answer properly?" asked Fritz triumphantly as Lecoq emerged from his hiding-place.

"Yes, perfectly," replied the detective. And then pushing aside the boy, who was standing in his way, he dashed after May.

A vague fear almost suffocated him. It had struck him that the fugitive had not been either surprised or deeply affected by the news he had heard. He had come to the hotel depending upon Madame Milner's assistance, and the news of this woman's departure would naturally have alarmed him, for was she not the mysterious accomplice's confidential friend? Had May, then, guessed the trick that had been played upon him? And if so, how?

Lecoq's good sense told him plainly that the fugitive must have been put on his guard, and on rejoining Father Absinthe, he immediately exclaimed: "May spoke to some one on his way to the hotel."

"Why, how could you know that?" exclaimed the worthy man, greatly astonished.

"Ah! I was sure of it!"

"Who did he speak to?"

"To a very pretty woman, upon my word!—fair and plump as a partridge!"

"Ah! fate is against us!" exclaimed Lecoq with an oath. "I run on in advance to Madame Milner's house, so that May shan't see her. I invent an excuse to send her out of the hotel, and yet they meet each other."

Father Absinthe gave a despairing gesture. "Ah! if I had known!" he murmured; "but you did not tell me to prevent May from speaking to the passers-by."

"Never mind, my old friend," said Lecoq, consolingly; "it couldn't have been helped."

While this conversation was going on, the fugitive had reached the Faubourg Montmartre, and his pursuers were obliged to hasten forward and get closer to their man, so that they might not lose him in the crowd.

"Now," resumed Lecoq when they had overtaken him, "give me the particulars. Where did they meet?"

"In the Rue Saint-Quentin."

"Which saw the other first?"

"May."

"What did the woman say? Did you hear any cry of surprise?"

"I heard nothing, for I was quite fifty yards off; but by the woman's manner I could see she was stupefied."

Ah! if Lecoq could have witnessed the scene, what valuable deductions he might have drawn from it. "Did they talk for a long time?" he asked.

"For less than a quarter of an hour."

"Do you know whether Madame Milner gave May money or not?"

"I can't say. They gesticulated like mad—so violently, indeed, that I thought they were quarreling."

"They knew they were being watched, and were endeavoring to divert suspicion."

"If they would only arrest this woman and question her," suggested Father Absinthe.

"What good would it do? Hasn't M. Segmuller examined and cross-examined her a dozen times without drawing anything from her! Ah! she's a cunning one. She would declare that May met her and insisted that she should refund the ten francs he paid her for his room. We must do our best, however. If the accomplice has not been warned already, he will soon be told; so we must try to keep the two men apart. What ruse they will employ, I can't divine. But I know that it will be nothing hackneyed."

Lecoq's presumptions made Father Absinthe nervous. "The surest way, perhaps," ventured the latter, "would be to lock him up again!"

"No!" replied the young detective. "I want his secret, and I'll have it. What will be said of us if we two allow this man to escape us? He can't be visible and invisible by turns, like the devil. We'll see what he is going to do now that he's got some money and a plan—for he has both at the present moment. I would stake my right hand upon it."

At that same instant, as if May intended to convince Lecoq of the truth of his suspicion, he entered a tobacconist's shop and emerged an instant afterward with a cigar in his mouth.

XXI

SO the landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg had given May money. There could be no further doubt on that point after the purchase of this cigar. But had they agreed upon any plan? Had they had sufficient time to decide on the method that May was to employ with the view of baffling his pursuit?

It would seem so, since the fugitive's manner had now changed in more respects than one. If hitherto he had seemed to care little for the danger of pursuit and capture, at present he was evidently uneasy and agitated. After walking so long in the full sunlight, with his head high in the air, he now slunk along in the shadow of the houses, hiding himself as much as possible.

"It is evident that his fears have increased in proportion with his hopes," said Lecoq to his companion. "He was quite unnerved when we saw him at the Odeon, and the merest trifle would have decided him to surrender; now, however, he thinks he has a chance to escape with his secret."

The fugitive was following the boulevards, but suddenly he turned into a side street and made his way toward the Temple, where, soon afterward, Father Absinthe and Lecoq found him conversing with one of those importunate dealers in cast-off garments who consider every passer-by their lawful prey. The vender and May were evidently debating a question of price; but the latter was plainly no skilful bargainer, for with a somewhat disappointed air he soon gave up the discussion and entered the shop.

"Ah, so now he has some coin he has determined on a costume," remarked Lecoq. "Isn't that always an escaped prisoner's first impulse?"

Soon afterward May emerged into the street. His appearance was decidedly changed, for he wore a pair of dark blue linen trousers, of the type French "navvies" habitually affect, and a loosely fitting coat of rough woolen material. A gay silk 'kerchief was knotted about his throat, and a black silk

cap was set on one side of his head. Thus attired, he was scarcely more prepossessing in appearance than Lecoq, and one would have hesitated before deciding which of the two it would be preferable to meet at night on a deserted highway.

May seemed very well pleased with his transformation, and was evidently more at ease in his new attire. On leaving the shop, however, he glanced suspiciously around him, as if to ascertain which of the passers-by were watching his movements. He had not parted with his broadcloth suit, but was carrying it under his arm, wrapped up in a handkerchief. The only thing he had left behind him was his tall chimney-pot hat.

Lecoq would have liked to enter the shop and make some inquiries, but he felt that it would be imprudent to do so, for May had settled his cap on his head with a gesture that left no doubt as to his intentions. A second later he turned into the Rue du Temple, and now the chase began in earnest; for the fugitive proved as swift and agile as a stag, and it was no small task to keep him well in sight. He had no doubt lived in England and Germany, since he spoke the language of these countries like a native; but one thing was certain—he knew Paris as thoroughly as the most expert Parisian.

This was shown by the way in which he dashed into the Rue des Gravelliers, and by the precision of his course through the many winding streets that lie between the Rue du Temple and the Rue Beaubourg. He seemed to know this quarter of the capital by heart; as well, indeed, as if he had spent half his life there. He knew all the wine-shops communicating with two streets—all the byways, passages, and tortuous alleys. Twice he almost escaped his pursuers, and once his salvation hung upon a thread. If he had remained in an obscure corner, where he was completely hidden, only an instant longer, the two detectives would have passed him by and his safety would have been assured.

The pursuit presented immense difficulties. Night was coming on, and with it that light fog which almost invariably accompanies a spring sunset. Soon the street-lamps glimmered luridly in the mist, and then it required a keen eyesight indeed to see even for a moderate distance. And, to add to this drawback, the streets were now thronged with workmen returning home after their daily toil, and with housewives intent on purchasing provisions for the evening meal, while round about each dwelling there congregated its numerous denizens swarming like

bees around a hive. May, however, took advantage of every opportunity to mislead the persons who might be following him. Groups collected around some cheap-jack's stall, street accidents, a block of vehicles—everything was utilized by him with such marvelous presence of mind that he often glided through the crowd without leaving any sign of his passage.

At last he left the neighborhood of the Rue des Gravelliers and made for a broader street. Reaching the Boulevard de Sebastopol, he turned to the left, and took a fresh start. He darted on with marvelous rapidity, with his elbows pressed close to his body—husbanding his breath and timing his steps with the precision of a dancing-master. Never pausing, and without once turning his head, he ever hurried on. And it was at the same regular but rapid pace that he covered the Boulevard de Sebastopol, crossed the Place du Chatelet, and proceeded to mount the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

Here he suddenly halted before a cab-stand. He spoke to one of the drivers, opened the door of his vehicle, and jumped in. The cab started off at a rapid pace. But May was not inside. He had merely passed through the vehicle, getting out at the other door, and just as the driver was departing for an imaginary destination May slipped into an adjacent cab which left the stand at a gallop. Perhaps, after so many ruses, after such formidable efforts after this last stratagem—perhaps May believed that he was free.

He was mistaken. Behind the cab which bore him onward, and while he leaned back against the cushions to rest, a man was running; and this man was Lecoq. Poor Father Absinthe had fallen by the way. In front of the Palais de Justice he paused, exhausted and breathless, and Lecoq had little hope of seeing him again, since he had all he could do to keep his man in sight without stopping to make the chalk-marks agreed upon.

May had instructed his driver to take him to the Place d'Italie: requesting him, moreover, to stop exactly in the middle of the square. This was about a hundred paces from the police station in which he had been temporarily confined with the Widow Chupin. When the vehicle halted, he sprang to the ground and cast a rapid glance around him, as if looking for some dreaded shadow. He could see nothing, however, for although surprised by the sudden stoppage, Lecoq had yet had time to fling himself flat on his stomach under the body of the cab, regardless of all danger of being crushed by the wheels.

May was apparently reassured. He paid the cabman and then retraced his course toward the Rue Mouffetard.

With a bound, Lecoq was on his feet again, and started after the fugitive as eagerly as a ravenous dog might follow a bone. He had reached the shadow cast by the large trees in the outer boulevards when a faint whistle resounded in his ears. "Father Absinthe!" he exclaimed in a tone of delighted surprise.

"The same," replied the old detective, "and quite rested, thanks to a passing cabman who picked me up and brought me here—"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq. "Let us keep our eyes open."

May was now walking quite leisurely. He stopped first before one and then before another of the numerous wine-shops and eating-houses that abound in this neighborhood. He was apparently looking for some one or something, which of the two Lecoq could not, of course, divine. However, after peering through the glass doors of three of these establishments and then turning away, the fugitive at last entered the fourth. The two detectives, who were enabled to obtain a good view of the shop inside, saw the supposed murderer cross the room and seat himself at a table where a man of unusually stalwart build, ruddy-faced and gray-whiskered, was already seated.

"The accomplice!" murmured Father Absinthe.

Was this really the redoubtable accomplice? Under other circumstances Lecoq would have hesitated to place dependence on a vague similarity in personal appearance; but here probabilities were so strongly in favor of Father Absinthe's assertion that the young detective at once admitted its truth. Was not this meeting the logical sequence of May and Madame Milner's chance interview a few hours before?

"May," thought Lecoq, "began by taking all the money Madame Milner had about her, and then instructed her to tell his accomplice to come and wait for him in some cheap restaurant near here. If he hesitated and looked inside the different establishments, it was only because he hadn't been able to specify any particular one. Now, if they don't throw aside the mask, it will be because May is not sure he has eluded pursuit and because the accomplice fears that Madame Milner may have been followed."

The accomplice, if this new personage was really the accomplice, had resorted to a disguise not unlike that which May and

Lecoq had both adopted. He wore a dirty blue blouse and a hideous old slouch hat, which was well-nigh in tatters. He had, in fact, rather exaggerated his make-up, for his sinister physiognomy attracted especial attention even beside the depraved and ferocious faces of the other customers in the shop. For this low eating-house was a regular den of thieves and cut-throats. Among those present there were not four workmen really worthy of that name. The others occupied in eating and drinking there were all more or less familiar with prison life. The least to be dreaded were the barriere loafers, easily recognized by their glazed caps and their loosely knotted neckerchiefs. The majority of the company appeared to consist of this class.

And yet May, that man who was so strongly suspected of belonging to the highest social sphere, seemed to be perfectly at home. He called for the regular "ordinary" and a "chopine" of wine, and then, after gulping down his soup, bolted great pieces of beef, pausing every now and then to wipe his mouth on the back of his sleeve. But was he conversing with his neighbor? This it was impossible to discern through the glass door, all obscured by smoke and steam.

"I must go in," said Lecoq, resolutely. "I must get a place near them, and listen."

"Don't think of such a thing," said Father Absinthe. "What if they recognized you?"

"They won't recognize me."

"If they do, they'll kill you."

Lecoq made a careless gesture.

"I certainly think that they wouldn't hesitate to rid themselves of me at any cost. But, nonsense! A detective who is afraid to risk his life is no better than a low spy. Why! you never saw even Gevrol flinch."

Perhaps Father Absinthe had wished to ascertain if his companion's courage was equal to his shrewdness and sagacity. If such were the case he was satisfied on this score now.

"You, my friend, will remain here to follow them if they leave hurriedly," resumed Lecoq, who in the mean while had already turned the handle of the door. Entering with a careless air and taking a seat at a table near that occupied by the fugitive and the man in the slouch hat, he called for a plate of meat and a "chopine" of wine in a guttural voice.

The fugitive and the ruffian opposite him *were* talking, but

like strangers who had met by chance, and not at all after the fashion of friends who have met at a rendezvous. They spoke in the jargon of their pretended rank in life, not that puerile slang met with in romances descriptive of low life, but that obscene, vulgar dialect which it is impossible to render, so changeable and diverse is the signification of its words.

"What wonderful actors!" thought Lecoq; "what perfection! what method! How I should be deceived if I were not absolutely certain!"

For the moment the man in the slouch hat was giving a detailed account of the different prisons in France. He described the governors of the principal houses of detention; explained the divergencies of discipline in different establishments; and recounted that the food at Poissy was ten times better than that at Fontevrault.

Lecoq, having finished his repast, ordered a small glass of brandy, and, leaning his back against the wall and closing his eyes, pretended to fall asleep. His ears were wide open, however, and he carefully listened to the conversation.

Soon May began talking in his turn; and he narrated his story exactly as he had related it to the magistrate, from the murder up to his escape, without forgetting to mention the suspicions attached to his identity—suspicions which afforded him great amusement, he said. He added that he would be perfectly happy if he had money enough to take him back to Germany; but unfortunately he only had a few sous and didn't know where or how to procure any more. He had not even succeeded in selling some clothing which belonged to him, and which he had with him in a bundle.

At these words the man in the tattered felt hat declared that he had too good a heart to leave a comrade in such embarrassment. He knew, in the very same street, an obliging dealer in such articles, and he offered to take May to his place at once. May's only response was to rise, saying: "Let us start." And they did start, with Lecoq at their heels.

They walked rapidly on until passing the Rue Fer-a-Moulin, when they turned into a narrow, dimly lighted alley, and entered a dingy dwelling.

"Run and ask the concierge if there are not two doors by which any one can leave this house," said Lecoq, addressing Father Absinthe.

The latter instantly obeyed. He learned, however, that the

house had only one street door, and accordingly the two detectives waited. "We are discovered!" murmured Lecoq. "I am sure of it. May must have recognized me, or the boy at the Hotel de Mariembourg has described me to the accomplice."

Father Absinthe made no response, for just then the two men came out of the house. May was jingling some coins in his hand, and seemed to be in a very bad temper. "What infernal rascals these receivers are!" he grumbled.

However, although he had only received a small sum for his clothing, he probably felt that his companion's kindness deserved some reward; for immediately afterward he proposed they should take a drink together, and with that object in view they entered a wine-shop close by. They remained here for more than an hour, drinking together; and only left this establishment to enter one a hundred paces distant. Turned out by the landlord, who was anxious to shut up, the two friends now took refuge in the next one they found open. Here again they were soon turned out and then they hurried to another boozing-den—and yet again to a fifth. And so, after drinking innumerable bottles of wine, they contrived to reach the Place Saint-Michel at about one o'clock in the morning. Here, however, they found nothing to drink; for all the wine-shops were closed.

The two men then held a consultation together, and, after a short discussion, they walked arm-in-arm toward the Faubourg Saint-Germain, like a pair of friends. The liquor they had imbibed was seemingly producing its effect, for they often staggered in their walk, and talked not merely loudly but both at the same time. In spite of the danger, Lecoq advanced near enough to catch some fragments of their conversation; and the words "a good stroke," and "money enough to satisfy one," reached his ears.

Father Absinthe's confidence wavered. "All this will end badly," he murmured.

"Don't be alarmed," replied his friend. "I frankly confess that I don't understand the maneuvres of these wily confederates, but what does that matter after all; now the two men are together, I feel sure of success—sure. If one runs away, the other will remain, and Gevrol shall soon see which is right, he or I."

Meanwhile the two drunkards had slackened their pace. By the manner in which they examined the magnificent mansions

of the Faubourg Saint-German, one might have suspected them of the very worst intentions. In the Rue de Varrennes, at only a few steps from the Rue de la Chaise, they suddenly paused before a wall of moderate height surrounding an immense garden. The man in the slouch hat now did the talking, and explained to May—as the detectives could tell by his gestures—that the mansion to which the garden belonged had its front entrance in the Rue de Grenelle.

"Bah!" growled Lecoq, "how much further will they carry this nonsense?"

They carried it farther than the young detective had ever imagined. May suddenly sprang on to his companion's shoulders, and raised himself to a level with the summit of the wall. An instant afterward a heavy thud might have been heard. He had let himself drop into the garden. The man in the slouch hat remained in the street to watch.

The enigmatical fugitive had accomplished this strange, inconceivable design so swiftly that Lecoq had neither the time nor the desire to oppose him. His amazement at this unexpected misfortune was so great that for an instant he could neither think nor move. But he quickly regained his self-possession, and at once decided what was to be done. With a sure eye he measured the distance separating him from May's accomplice, and with three bounds he was upon him. The man in the slouched hat attempted to shout, but an iron hand stifled the cry in his throat. He tried to escape, and to beat off his assailant, but a vigorous kick stretched him on the ground as if he had been a child. Before he had time to think of further resistance he was bound, gagged, and carried, half-suffocated, to the corner of the Rue de la Chaise. No sound had been heard; not a word, not an ejaculation, not even a noise of shuffling—nothing. Any suspicious sound might have reached May, on the other side of the wall, and warned him of what was going on.

"How strange," murmured Father Absinthe, too much amazed to lend a helping hand to his younger colleague. "How strange! Who would have supposed—"

"Enough! enough!" interrupted Lecoq, in that harsh, imperious voice, which imminent peril always gives to energetic men. "Enough!—we will talk to-morrow. I must run away for a minute, and you will remain here. If May shows himself, capture him; don't allow him to escape."

"I understand; but what is to be done with the man who is lying there?"

"Leave him where he is. I have bound him securely, so there is nothing to fear. When the night-police pass, we will give him into charge—"

He paused and listened. A short way down the street, heavy, measured footsteps could be heard approaching.

"There they come," said Father Absinthe.

"Ah! I dared not hope it! I shall have a good chance now."

At the same moment, two sergeants de ville, whose attention had been attracted by this group at the street corner, hastened toward them. In a few words, Lecoq explained the situation, and it was decided that one of the sergeants should take the accomplice to the station-house, while the other remained with Father Absinthe to cut off May's retreat.

"And now," said Lecoq, "I will run round to the Rue de Grenelle and give the alarm. To whose house does this garden belong?"

"What!" replied one of the sergeants in surprise, "don't you know the gardens of the Duke de Sairmeuse, the famous duke who is a millionaire ten times over, and who was formerly the friend—"

"Ah, yes, I know, I know!" said Lecoq.

"The thief," resumed the sergeant, "walked into a pretty trap when he got over that wall. There was a reception at the mansion this evening, as there is every Monday, and every one in the house is still up. The guests are only just leaving, for there were five or six carriages still at the door as we passed by."

Lecoq darted off extremely troubled by what he had just heard. It now seemed to him that if May had got into this garden, it was not for the purpose of committing a robbery, but in the hope of throwing his pursuers off the track, and making his escape by way of the Rue de Grenelle, which he hoped to do unnoticed, in the bustle and confusion attending the departure of the guests.

On reaching the Hotel de Sairmeuse, a princely dwelling, the long façade of which was brilliantly illuminated, Lecoq found a last carriage just coming from the courtyard, while several footmen were extinguishing the lights, and an imposing "Suisse," dazzling to behold in his gorgeous livery, prepared to close the heavy double doors of the grand entrance.

The young detective advanced toward this important personage: "Is this the Hotel de Sairmeuse?" he inquired.

The Suisse suspended his work to survey the audacious vagabond who ventured to question him, and then in a harsh voice replied: "I advise you to pass on. I want none of your jesting."

Lecoq had forgotten that he was clad as a barriere loafer. "Ah," he rejoined, "I'm not what I seem to be. I'm an agent of the secret service; by name Lecoq. Here is my card, and I came to tell you that an escaped criminal has just scaled the garden wall in the rear of the Hotel de Sairmeuse."

"A crim-in-al?"

The young detective thought a little exaggeration could do no harm, and might perhaps insure him more ready aid. "Yes," he replied; "and one of the most dangerous kind—a man who has the blood of three victims already on his hands. We have just arrested his accomplice, who helped him over the wall."

The flunky's ruby nose paled perceptibly. "I will summon the servants," he faltered, and suiting the action to the word, he was raising his hand to the bell-chain, employed to announce the arrival of visitors, when Lecoq hastily stopped him.

"A word first!" said he. "Might not the fugitive have passed through the house and escaped by this door, without being seen? In that case he would be far away by this time."

"Impossible!"

"But why?"

"Excuse me, but I know what I am saying. First, the door opening into the garden is closed; it is only open during grand receptions, not for our ordinary Monday drawing-rooms. Secondly, Monseigneur requires me to stand on the threshold of the street door when he is receiving. To-day he repeated this order, and you may be sure that I haven't disobeyed him."

"Since that's the case," said Lecoq, slightly reassured, "we shall perhaps succeed in finding our man. Warn the servants, but without ringing the bell. The less noise we make, the greater will be our chance of success."

In a moment the fifty servants who peopled the ante-rooms, stables, and kitchens of the Hotel de Sairmeuse were gathered together. The great lanterns in the coach houses and stables were lighted, and the entire garden was illuminated as by enchantment.

"If May is concealed here," thought Lecoq, delighted to see so many auxiliaries, "it will be impossible for him to escape."

But it was in vain that the gardens were thoroughly explored over and over again; no one could be found. The sheds where gardening tools were kept, the conservatories, the summer houses, the two rustic pavilions at the foot of the garden, even the dog kennels, were scrupulously visited, but all in vain. The trees, with the exception of some horse-chestnuts at the rear of the garden, were almost destitute of leaves, but they were not neglected on that account. An agile boy, armed with a lantern, climbed each tree, and explored even the topmost branches.

"The murderer must have left by the way he came," obstinately repeated the Suisse who had armed himself with a huge pistol, and who would not let go his hold on Lecoq, fearing an accident perhaps.

To convince the Suisse of his error it was necessary for the young detective to place himself in communication with Father Absinthe and the sergeant de ville on the other side of the wall. As Lecoq had expected, the latter both replied that they had not once taken their eyes off the wall, and that not even a mouse had crossed into the street.

The exploration had hitherto been conducted after a somewhat haphazard fashion, each of the servants obeying his own inspiration; but the necessity of a methodically conducted search was now recognized. Accordingly, Lecoq took such measures that not a corner, not a recess, could possibly escape scrutiny; and he was dividing the task between his willing assistants, when a new-comer appeared upon the scene. This was a grave, smooth-faced individual in the attire of a notary.

"Monsieur Otto, Monseigneur's first valet de chambre," the Suisse murmured in Lecoq's ear.

This important personage came on behalf of Monsieur le Duc (*he* did not say "Monseigneur") to inquire the meaning of all this uproar. When he had received an explanation, M. Otto condescended to compliment Lecoq on his efficiency, and to recommend that the house should be searched from garret to cellar. These precautions alone would allay the fears of Madame la Duchesse.

He then departed, and the search began again with renewed ardor. A mouse concealed in the gardens of the Hotel de Sairmeuse could not have escaped discovery, so minute were the

investigations. Not a single object of any size was left undisturbed. The trees were examined leaf by leaf, one might almost say. Occasionally the discouraged servants proposed to abandon the search; but Lecoq urged them on. He ran from one to the other, entreating and threatening by turns, swearing that he asked only one more effort, and that this effort would assuredly be crowned with success. Vain promises! The fugitive could not be found.

The evidence was now conclusive. To persist in searching the garden any longer would be worse than folly. Accordingly, the young detective decided to recall his auxiliaries. "That's enough," he said, in a despondent voice. "It is now certain that the criminal is no longer in the garden."

Was he cowering in some corner of the great house, white with fear, and trembling at the noise made by his pursuers? One might reasonably suppose this to be the case; and such was the opinion of the servants. Above all, such was the opinion of the Suisse who renewed with growing assurance his affirmations of a few moments before.

"I have not moved from the threshold of the house to-night," he said, "and I should certainly have seen any person who passed out."

"Let us go into the house, then," said Lecoq. "But first let me ask my companion, who is waiting for me in the street, to join me. It is unnecessary for him to remain any longer where he is."

When Father Absinthe had responded to the summons all the lower doors were carefully closed and guarded, and the search recommenced inside the house, one of the largest and most magnificent residences of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. But at this moment all the treasures of the universe could not have won a single glance or a second's attention from Lecoq. All his thoughts were occupied with the fugitive. He passed through several superb drawing-rooms, along an unrivaled picture gallery, across a magnificent dining-room, with sideboards groaning beneath their load of massive plate, without paying the slightest attention to the marvels of art and upholstery that were offered to his view. He hurried on, accompanied by the servants who were guiding and lighting him. He lifted heavy articles of furniture as easily as he would have lifted a feather; he moved each chair and sofa from its place, he explored each cupboard and wardrobe, and drew back in turns all the wall-

hangings, window-curtains, and *portieres*. A more complete search would have been impossible. In each of the rooms and passages that Lecoq entered not a nook was left unexplored, not a corner was forgotten. At length, after two hours' continuous work, Lecoq returned to the first floor. Only five or six servants had accompanied him on his tour of inspection. The others had dropped off one by one, weary of this adventure, which had at first possessed the attractions of a pleasure party.

"You have seen everything, gentlemen," declared an old footman.

"Everything!" interrupted the Suisse, "everything! Certainly not. There are the private apartments of Monseigneur and those of Madame la Duchesse still to be explored."

"Alas!" murmured Lecoq, "What good would it be?"

But the Suisse had already gone to rap gently at one of the doors opening into the hall. His interest equaled that of the detectives. They had seen the murderer enter; he had not seen him go out; therefore the man was in the house and he wished him to be found.

The door at which he had knocked soon opened, and the grave, clean-shaven face of Otto, the duke's first valet de chambre, showed itself. "What the deuce do you want?" he asked in surly tones.

"To enter Monseigneur's room," replied the Suisse, "in order to see if the fugitive has not taken refuge there."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed the head valet de chambre. "How could any one have entered here? Besides, I can't suffer Monsieur le Duc to be disturbed. He has been at work all night, and he is just going to take a bath before going to bed."

The Suisse seemed very vexed at this rebuff; and Lecoq was presenting his excuses, when another voice was heard exclaiming. "Let these worthy men do their duty, Otto."

"Ah! do you hear that!" exclaimed the Suisse triumphantly.

"Very well, since Monsieur le Duc permits it. Come in, I will light you through the apartments."

Lecoq entered, but it was only for form's sake that he walked through the different apartments; a library, an admirable study, and a charming smoking-room. As he was passing through the bed-chamber, he had the honor of seeing the Duc de Sairmeuse through the half-open door of a small, white, marble bath-room.

"Ah, well!" cried the duke, affably, "is the fugitive still invisible?"

"Still invisible, monsieur," Lecoq respectfully replied.

The valet de chambre did not share his master's good humor. "I think, gentlemen," said he, "that you may spare yourselves the trouble of visiting the apartments of the duchess. It is a duty we have taken upon ourselves—the women and I—and we have looked even in the bureau drawers."

Upon the landing the old footman, who had not ventured to enter his master's apartments, was awaiting the detectives. He had doubtless received his orders, for he politely inquired if they desired anything, and if, after such a fatiguing night, they would not find some cold meat and a glass of wine acceptable. Father Absinthe's eyes sparkled. He probably thought that in this *quasi*-royal abode they must have delicious things to eat and drink—such viands, indeed, as he had never tasted in his life. But Lecoq civilly refused, and left the Hotel de Sairmeuse, reluctantly followed by his old companion.

He was eager to be alone. For several hours he had been making immense efforts to conceal his rage and despair. May escaped! vanished! evaporated! The thought drove him almost mad. What he had declared to be impossible had nevertheless occurred. In his confidence and pride, he had sworn to answer for the prisoner's head with his own life; and yet he had allowed him to slip between his fingers.

When he was once more in the street, he paused in front of Father Absinthe, and crossing his arms, inquired: "Well, my friend, what do you think of all this?"

The old detective shook his head, and in serene unconsciousness of his want of tact, responded: "I think that Gevrol will chuckle with delight."

At this mention of his most cruel enemy, Lecoq bounded from the ground like a wounded bull. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Gevrol has not won the battle yet. We have lost May; it is a great misfortune; but his accomplice remains in our hands. We hold the crafty man who has hitherto defeated all our plans, no matter how carefully arranged. He is certainly shrewd and devoted to his friend; but we will see if his devotion will withstand the prospect of hard labor in the penitentiary. And that is what awaits him, if he is silent, and if he thus accepts the responsibility of aiding and abetting

the fugitive's escape. Oh! I've no fears—M. Segmuller will know how to draw the truth out of him."

So speaking, Lecoq brandished his clinched fist with a threatening air and then, in calmer tones, he added: "But we must go to the station-house where the accomplice was removed. I wish to question him a little."

XXII

IT was six o'clock, and the dawn was just breaking when Father Absinthe and his companion reached the station-house, where they found the superintendent seated at a small table, making out his report. He did not move when they entered, failing to recognize them under their disguises. But when they mentioned their names, he rose with evident cordiality, and held out his hand.

"Upon my word!" said he, "I congratulate you on your capture last night."

Father Absinthe and Lecoq exchanged an anxious look. "What capture?" they both asked in a breath.

"Why, that individual you sent me last night so carefully bound."

"Well, what about him?"

The superintendent burst into a hearty laugh. "So you are ignorant of your good fortune," said he. "Ah! luck has favored you, and you will receive a handsome reward."

"Pray tell us what we've captured?" asked Father Absinthe, impatiently.

"A scoundrel of the deepest dye, an escaped convict, who has been missing for three months. You must have a description of him in your pocket—Joseph Couturier, in short."

On hearing these words, Lecoq became so frightfully pale that Father Absinthe, fearing he was going to faint, raised his arms to prevent his falling. A chair stood close by, however, and on this Lecoq allowed himself to drop. "Joseph Couturier," he faltered, evidently unconscious of what he was saying. "Joseph Couturier! an escaped convict!"

The superintendent certainly did not understand Lecoq's agitation any better than Father Absinthe's discomfited air.

"You have reason to be proud of your work; your success will make a sensation this morning," he repeated. "You have captured a famous prize. I can see Gevrol's nose now when he hears the news. Only yesterday he was boasting that he alone was capable of securing this dangerous rascal."

After such an irreparable failure as that which had overtaken Lecoq, the unintended irony of these compliments was bitter in the extreme. The superintendent's words of praise fell on his ears like so many blows from a sledge hammer.

"You must be mistaken," he eventually remarked, rising from his seat and summoning all his energy to his assistance. "That man is not Couturier."

"Oh, I'm not mistaken; you may be quite sure of that. He fully answers the description appended to the circular ordering his capture, and even the little finger of his left hand is lacking, as is mentioned."

"Ah! that's a proof indeed!" groaned Father Absinthe.

"It is indeed. And I know another one more conclusive still. Couturier is an old acquaintance of mine. I have had him in custody before; and he recognized *me* last night just as I recognized him."

After this further argument was impossible; hence it was in an entirely different tone that Lecoq remarked: "At least, my friend, you will allow me to address a few questions to your prisoner."

"Oh! as many as you like. But first of all, let us bar the door and place two of my men before it. This Couturier has a fondness for the open air, and he wouldn't hesitate to dash out our brains if he only saw a chance of escape."

After taking these precautions, the man was removed from the cage in which he had been confined. He stepped forward with a smile on his face, having already recovered that nonchalant manner common to old offenders who, when in custody, seem to lose all feeling of anger against the police. They are not unlike those gamblers who, after losing their last halfpenny, nevertheless willingly shake hands with their adversary.

Couturier at once recognized Lecoq. "Ah!" said he, "It was you who did that business last night. You can boast of having a solid fist! You fell upon me very unexpectedly; and the back of my neck is still the worse for your clutch."

"Then, if I were to ask a favor of you, you wouldn't be disposed to grant it?"

"Oh, yes! all the same. I have no more malice in my composition than a chicken; and I rather like your face. What do you want of me?"

"I should like to have some information about the man who accompanied you last night."

Couturier's face darkened. "I am really unable to give you any," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know him. I never saw him before last night."

"It's hard to believe that. A fellow doesn't enlist the first-comer for an expedition like yours last evening. Before undertaking such a job with a man, one finds out something about him."

"I don't say I haven't been guilty of a stupid blunder," replied Couturier. "Indeed I could murder myself for it, but there was nothing about the man to make me suspect that he belonged to the secret-service. He spread a net for me, and I jumped into it. It was made for me, of course; but it wasn't necessary for me to put my foot into it."

"You are mistaken, my man," said Lecoq. "The individual in question didn't belong to the police force. I pledge you my word of honor, he didn't."

For a moment Couturier surveyed Lecoq with a knowing air, as if he hoped to discover whether he were speaking the truth or attempting to deceive him. "I believe you," he said at last. "And to prove it I'll tell you how it happened. I was dining alone last evening in a restaurant in the Rue Mouffetard, when that man came in and took a seat beside me. Naturally we began to talk; and I thought him a very good sort of a fellow. I forget how it began, but somehow or other he mentioned that he had some clothes he wanted to sell; and being glad to oblige him, I took him to a friend, who bought them from him. It was doing him a good turn, wasn't it? Well, he offered me something to drink, and I returned the compliment. We had a number of glasses together, and by midnight I began to see double. He then began to propose a plan, which, he swore, would make us both rich. It was to steal the plate from a superb mansion. There would be no risk for me; he would take charge of the whole affair.

I had only to help him over the wall, and keep watch. The proposal was tempting—was it not? You would have thought so, if you had been in my place, and yet I hesitated. But the fellow insisted. He swore that he was acquainted with the habits of the house; that Monday evening was a grand gala night there, and that on these occasions the servants didn't lock up the plate. After a little while I consented."

A fleeting flush tinged Lecoq's pale cheeks. "Are you sure he told you that the Duc de Sairmeuse received every Monday evening?" he asked, eagerly.

"Certainly; how else could I have known it! He even mentioned the name you uttered just now, a name ending in 'euse.'"

A strange thought had just flitted through Lecoq's mind. "What if May and the Duc de Sairmeuse should be one and the same person?" But the notion seemed so thoroughly absurd, so utterly inadmissible that he quickly dismissed it, despising himself even for having entertained it for a single instant. He cursed his inveterate inclination always to look at events from a romantic impossible side, instead of considering them as natural commonplace incidents. After all there was nothing surprising in the fact that a man of the world, such as he supposed May to be, should know the day set aside by the Duc de Sairmeuse for the reception of his friends.

The young detective had nothing more to expect from Couturier. He thanked him, and after shaking hands with the superintendent, walked away, leaning on Father Absinthe's arm. For he really had need of support. His legs trembled, his head whirled, and he felt sick both in body and in mind. He had failed miserably, disgracefully. He had flattered himself that he possessed a genius for his calling, and yet he had been easily outwitted.

To rid himself of pursuit, May had only had to invent a pretended accomplice, and this simple stratagem had sufficed to nonplus those who were on his trail.

Father Absinthe was rendered uneasy by his colleague's evident dejection. "Where are we going?" he inquired; "to the Palais de Justice, or to the Prefecture de Police?"

Lecoq shuddered on hearing this question, which brought him face to face with the horrible reality of his situation. "To the Prefecture!" he responded. "Why should I go there? To expose myself to Gevrol's insults, perhaps? I haven't courage enough for that. Nor do I feel that I have strength to go

to M. Segmuller and say: 'Forgive me: you have judged me too favorably. I am a fool!'"

"What are we to do?"

"Ah! I don't know. Perhaps I shall embark for America—perhaps I shall throw myself into the river."

He had walked about a hundred yards when suddenly he stopped short. "No!" he exclaimed, with a furious stamp of his foot. "No, this affair shan't end like this. I have sworn to have the solution of the enigma—and I will have it!" For a moment he reflected; then, in a calmer voice, he added: "There is one man who can save us, a man who will see what I haven't been able to discern, who will understand things that I couldn't. Let us go and ask his advice, my course will depend on his reply—come!"

After such a day and such a night, it might have been expected that these two men would have felt an irresistible desire to sleep and rest. But Lecoq was sustained by wounded vanity, intense disappointment, and yet unextinguished hope of revenge: while poor Father Absinthe was not unlike some luckless cab-horse, which, having forgotten there is such a thing as repose, is no longer conscious of fatigue, but travels on until he falls down dead. The old detective felt that his limbs were failing him; but Lecoq said: "It is necessary," and so he walked on.

They both went to Lecoq's lodgings, where they laid aside their disguises and made themselves trim. Then after breakfasting they hastily betook themselves to the Rue St. Lazare, where, entering one of the most stylish houses in the street, Lecoq inquired of the concierge: "Is M. Tabaret at home?"

"Yes, but he's ill," was the reply.

"Very ill?" asked Lecoq anxiously.

"It is hard to tell," replied the man: "it is his old complaint—gout." And with an air of hypocritical commiseration, he added: "M. Tabaret is not wise to lead the life he does. Women are very well in a way, but at his age—"

The two detectives exchanged a meaning glance, and as soon as they were out of hearing burst out laughing. Their hilarity had scarcely ceased when they reached the first floor, and rang the bell at the door of one of the apartments. The buxom-looking woman who appeared in answer to his summons, informed them that her master would receive them, although he was confined to his bed. "However, the doctor is with him

now," she added. "But perhaps the gentlemen would not mind waiting until he has gone?" The gentlemen replying in the affirmative, she then conducted them into a handsome library, and invited them to sit down.

The person whom Lecoq had come to consult was a man celebrated for wonderful shrewdness and penetration, well-nigh exceeding the bounds of possibility. For five-and-forty years he had held a petty post in one of the offices of the Mont de Piete, just managing to exist upon the meagre stipend he received. Suddenly enriched by the death of a relative, of whom he had scarcely ever heard, he immediately resigned his functions, and the very next day began to long for the same employment he had so often anathematized. In his endeavors to divert his mind, he began to collect old books, and heaped up mountains of tattered, worm-eaten volumes in immense oak bookcases. But despite this pastime to many so attractive, he could not shake off his weariness. He grew thin and yellow, and his income of forty thousand francs was literally killing him, when a sudden inspiration came to his relief. It came to him one evening after reading the memoirs of a celebrated detective, one of those men of subtle penetration, soft as silk, and supple as steel, whom justice sometimes sets upon the trail of crime.

"And I also am a detective!" he exclaimed.

This, however, he must prove. From that day forward he perused with feverish interest every book he could find that had any connection with the organization of the police service and the investigation of crime. Reports and pamphlets, letters and memoirs, he eagerly turned from one to the other, in his desire to master his subject. Such learning as he might find in books did not suffice, however, to perfect his education. Hence, whenever a crime came to his knowledge he started out in quest of the particulars and worked up the case by himself.

Soon these platonic investigations did not suffice, and one evening, at dusk, he summoned all his resolution, and, going on foot to the Prefecture de Police, humbly begged employment from the officials there. He was not very favorably received, for applicants were numerous. But he pleaded his cause so adroitly that at last he was charged with some trifling commissions. He performed them admirably. The great difficulty was then overcome. Other matters were entrusted to him, and he soon displayed a wonderful aptitude for his chosen work.

The case of Madame B——, the rich banker's wife, made him virtually famous. Consulted at a moment when the police had abandoned all hope of solving the mystery, he proved by A plus B—by a mathematical deduction, so to speak—that the dear lady must have stolen her own property; and events soon proved that he had told the truth. After this success he was always called upon to advise in obscure and difficult cases.

It would be difficult to tell his exact status at the Prefecture. When a person is employed, salary or compensation of some kind is understood, but this strange man had never consented to receive a penny. What he did he did for his own pleasure —for the gratification of a passion which had become his very life. When the funds allowed him for expenses seemed insufficient, he at once opened his private purse; and the men who worked with him never went away without some substantial token of his liberality. Of course, such a man had many enemies. He did as much work—and far better work than any two inspectors of police; and he didn't receive a sou of salary. Hence, in calling him "spoil-trade," his rivals were not far from right.

Whenever any one ventured to mention his name favorably in Gevrol's presence, the jealous inspector could scarcely control himself, and retorted by denouncing an unfortunate mistake which this remarkable man once made. Inclined to obstinacy, like all enthusiastic men, he had indeed once effected the conviction of an innocent prisoner—a poor little tailor, who was accused of killing his wife. This single error (a grievous one no doubt), in a career of some duration, had the effect of cooling his ardor perceptibly; and subsequently he seldom visited the Prefecture. But yet he remained "the oracle," after the fashion of those great advocates who, tired of practise at the bar, still win great and glorious triumphs in their consulting rooms, lending to others the weapons they no longer care to wield themselves.

When the authorities were undecided what course to pursue in some great case, they invariably said: "Let us go and consult Tirauclair." For this was the name by which he was most generally known: a sobriquet derived from a phrase which was always on his lips. He was constantly saying: "Il faut que cela se tire au clair: That must be brought to light." Hence, the not altogether inappropriate appellation of "Pere Tirauclair," or "Father Bring-to-Light."

Perhaps this sobriquet assisted him in keeping his occupation secret from his friends among the general public. At all events they never suspected them. His disturbed life when he was working up a case, the strange visitors he received, his frequent and prolonged absences from home, were all imputed to a very unreasonable inclination to gallantry. His concierge was deceived as well as his friends, and laughing at his supposed infatuation, disrespectfully called him an old libertine. It was only the officials of the detective force who knew that Tirauclair and Tabaret were one and the same person.

Lecoq was trying to gain hope and courage by reflecting on the career of this eccentric man, when the buxom housekeeper reentered the library and announced that the physician had left. At the same time she opened a door and exclaimed: "This is the room; you gentlemen can enter now."

XXIII

ON a large canopied bed, sweating and panting beneath the weight of numerous blankets, lay the two-faced oracle—Tirauclair, of the Prefecture—Tabaret, of the Rue Saint Lazare. It was impossible to believe that the owner of such a face, in which a look of stupidity was mingled with one of perpetual astonishment, could possess superior talent, or even an average amount of intelligence. With his retreating forehead, and his immense ears, his odious turned-up nose, tiny eyes, and coarse, thick lips, M. Tabaret seemed an excellent type of the ignorant, pennywise, petty *rentier* class. Whenever he took his walks abroad, the juvenile street Arabs would impudently shout after him or try to mimic his favorite grimace. And yet his ungainliness did not seem to worry him in the least, while he appeared to take real pleasure in increasing his appearance of stupidity, solacing himself with the reflection that "he is not really a genius who seems to be one."

At the sight of the two detectives, whom he knew very well, his eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Good morning, Lecoq, my boy," said he. "Good morning, my old Absinthe. So you

think enough down there of poor Papa Tirauclair to come and see him?"

"We need your advice, Monsieur Tabaret."

"Ah, ah!"

"We have just been as completely outwitted as if we were babies in long clothes."

"What! was your man such a very cunning fellow?"

Lecoq heaved a sigh. "So cunning," he replied, "that, if I were superstitious, I should say he was the devil himself."

The sick man's face wore a comical expression of envy. "What! you have found a treasure like that," said he, "and you complain! Why, it is a magnificent opportunity—a chance to be proud of! You see, my boys, everything has degenerated in these days. The race of great criminals is dying out—those who've succeeded the old stock are like counterfeit coins. There's scarcely anything left outside a crowd of low offenders who are not worth the shoe leather expended in pursuing them. It is enough to disgust a detective, upon my word. No more trouble, emotion, anxiety, or excitement. When a crime is committed nowadays, the criminal is in jail the next morning, you've only to take the omnibus, and go to the culprit's house and arrest him. He's always found, the more the pity. But what has your fellow been up to?"

"He has killed three men."

"Oh! oh! oh!" said old Tabaret, in three different tones, plainly implying that this criminal was evidently superior to others of his species. "And where did this happen?"

"In a wine-shop near the barriere."

"Oh, yes, I recollect: a man named May. The murders were committed in the Widow Chupin's cabin. I saw the case mentioned in the 'Gazette des Tribunaux,' and your comrade, Fanferlot l'Ecureuil, who comes to see me, told me you were strangely puzzled about the prisoner's identity. So you are charged with investigating the affair? So much the better. Tell me all about it, and I will assist you as well as I can."

Suddenly checking himself, and lowering his voice, Tirauclair added: "But first of all, just do me the favor to get up. Now, wait a moment, and when I motion you, open that door there, on the left, very suddenly. Mariette, my housekeeper, who is curiosity incarnate, is standing there listening. I hear her hair rubbing against the lock. Now!"

The young detective immediately obeyed, and Mariette, caught

in the act, hastened away, pursued by her master's sarcasms. "You might have known that you couldn't succeed at that!" he shouted after her.

Although Lecoq and Father Absinthe were much nearer the door than old Tirauclair, neither of them had heard the slightest sound; and they looked at each other in astonishment, wondering whether their host had been playing a little farce for their benefit, or whether his sense of hearing was really so acute as this incident would seem to indicate.

"Now," said Tabaret, settling himself more comfortably upon his pillows—"now I will listen to you, my boy. Mariette will not come back again."

On his way to Tabaret's, Lecoq had busied himself in preparing his story; and it was in the clearest possible manner that he related all the particulars, from the moment when Gevrol opened the door of the Poivriere to the instant when May leaped over the garden wall in the rear of the Hotel de Sairmeuse.

While the young detective was telling his story, old Tabaret seemed completely transformed. His gout was entirely forgotten. According to the different phases of the recital, he either turned and twisted on his bed, uttering little cries of delight or disappointment, or else lay motionless, plunged in the same kind of ecstatic reverie which enthusiastic admirers of classical music yield themselves up to while listening to one of the great Beethoven's divine sonatas.

"If I had been there! If only I had been there!" he murmured regretfully every now and then through his set teeth, though when Lecoq's story was finished, enthusiasm seemed decidedly to have gained the upper hand. "It is beautiful! it is grand!" he exclaimed. "And with just that one phrase: 'It is the Prussians who are coming,' for a starting point! Lecoq, my boy, I must say that you have conducted this affair like an angel!"

"Don't you mean to say like a fool?" asked the discouraged detective.

"No, my friend, certainly not. You have rejoiced my old heart. I can die; I shall have a successor. Ah! that Gevrol who betrayed you—for he did betray you, there's no doubt about it—that obtuse, obstinate 'General' is not worthy to blacken your shoes!"

"You overpower me, Monsieur Tabaret!" interrupted Lecoq,

as yet uncertain whether his host was poking fun at him or not. "But it is none the less true that May has disappeared, and I have lost my reputation before I had begun to make it."

"Don't be in such a hurry to reject my compliments," replied old Tabaret, with a horrible grimace. "I say that you have conducted this investigation very well; but it could have been done much better, very much better. You have a talent for your work, that's evident; but you lack experience; you become elated by a trifling advantage, or discouraged by a mere nothing; you fail, and yet persist in holding fast to a fixed idea, as a moth flutters about a candle. Then, you are young. But never mind that, it's a fault you will outgrow only too soon. And now, to speak frankly, I must tell you that you have made a great many blunders."

Lecoq hung his head like a schoolboy receiving a reprimand from his teacher. After all was he not a scholar, and was not this old man his master?

"I will now enumerate your mistakes," continued old Tabaret, "and I will show you how, on at least three occasions, you allowed an opportunity for solving this mystery to escape you."

"But—"

"Pooh! pooh! my boy, let me talk a little while now. What axiom did you start with? You said: 'Always distrust appearances; believe precisely the contrary of what appears true, or even probable.'"

"Yes, that is exactly what I said to myself."

"And it was a very wise conclusion. With that idea in your lantern to light your path, you ought to have gone straight to the truth. But you are young, as I said before; and the very first circumstance you find that seems at all probable you quite forget the rule which, as you yourself admit, should have governed your conduct. As soon as you meet a fact that seems even *more* than probable, you swallow it as eagerly as a gudgeon swallows an angler's bait."

This comparison could but pique the young detective. "I don't think I've been so simple as that," protested he.

"Bah! What did you think, then, when you heard that M. d'Escorval had broken his leg in getting out of his carriage?"

"Believe! I believed what they told me, because—"

He paused, and Tirauclair burst into a hearty fit of laughter. "You believed it," he said, "because it was a very plausible story."

"What would you have believed had you been in my place?"

"Exactly the opposite of what they told me. I might have been mistaken; but it would be the logical conclusion as my first course of reasoning."

This conclusion was so bold that Lecoq was disconcerted. "What!" he exclaimed; "do you suppose that M. d'Escorval's fall was only a fiction? that he didn't break his leg?"

Old Tabaret's face suddenly assumed a serious expression. "I don't suppose it," he replied; "I'm sure of it."

XXIV

LECOQ'S confidence in the oracle he was consulting was very great; but even old Tirauclair might be mistaken, and what he had just said seemed such an enormity, so completely beyond the bounds of possibility, that the young man could not conceal a gesture of incredulous surprise.

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are ready to affirm that M. d'Escorval is in quite as good health as Father Absinthe or myself; and that he has confined himself to his room for a couple of months to give a semblance of truth to a falsehood?"

"I would be willing to swear it."

"But what could possibly have been his object?"

Tabaret lifted his hands to heaven, as if imploring forgiveness for the young man's stupidity. "And it was in you," he exclaimed, "in you that I saw a successor, a disciple to whom I might transmit my method of induction; and now, you ask me such a question as that! Reflect a moment. Must I give you an example to assist you? Very well. Let it be so. Suppose yourself a magistrate. A crime is committed; you are charged with the duty of investigating it, and you visit the prisoner to question him. Very well. This prisoner has, hitherto, succeeded in concealing his identity—this was the case in the present instance, was it not? Very well. Now, what would you do if, at the very first glance, you recognized under the prisoner's disguise your best friend, or your worst enemy? What would you do, I ask?"

"I should say to myself that a magistrate who is obliged to hesitate between his duty and his inclinations, is placed in a very trying position, and I should endeavor to avoid the responsibility."

"I understand that; but would you reveal this prisoner's identity—remember, he might be your friend or your enemy?"

The question was so delicate that Lecoq remained silent for a moment, reflecting before he replied.

The pause was interrupted by Father Absinthe. "I should reveal nothing whatever!" he exclaimed. "I should remain absolutely neutral. I should say to myself others are trying to discover this man's identity. Let them do so if they can; but let my conscience be clear."

This was the cry of honesty; not the counsel of a casuist.

"I also should be silent," Lecoq at last replied; "and it seems to me that, in holding my tongue, I should not fail in my duty as a magistrate."

On hearing these words, Tabaret rubbed his hands together, as he always did when he was about to present some overwhelming argument. "Such being the case," said he, "do me the favor to tell me what pretext you would invent in order to withdraw from the case without exciting suspicion?"

"I don't know; I can't say now. But if I were placed in such a position I should find some excuse—invent something—"

"And if you could find nothing better," interrupted Tabaret, "you would adopt M. d'Escorval's expedient; you would pretend you had broken a limb. Only, as you are a clever fellow, you would sacrifice your arm; it would be less inconvenient than your leg; and you wouldn't be condemned to seclusion for several months."

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are convinced that M. d'Escorval knows who May really is."

Old Tirauclair turned so suddenly in his bed that his forgotten gout drew from him a terrible groan. "Can you doubt?" he exclaimed. "Can you possibly doubt it? What proofs do you want then? What connection do you see between the magistrate's fall and the prisoner's attempt at suicide? I wasn't there as you were; I only know the story as you have told it to me. I can't look at the facts with my own eyes, but according to your statements, which are I suppose correct, this is what I understand. When M. d'Escorval has completed his task at the Widow Chupin's house, he comes to the prison to

examine the supposed murderer. The two men recognize each other. Had they been alone, mutual explanations might have ensued, and affairs taken quite a different turn. But they were not alone; a third party was present—M. d'Escorval's clerk. So they could say nothing. The magistrate asked a few common-place questions, in a troubled voice, and the prisoner, terribly agitated, replied as best he could. Now, after leaving the cell, M. d'Escorval no doubt said to himself: 'I can't investigate the offenses of a man I hate!' He was certainly terribly perplexed. When you tried to speak to him, as he was leaving the prison, he harshly told you to wait till the next day; and a quarter of an hour later he pretended to fall down and break his leg."

"Then you think that M. d'Escorval and May are enemies?" inquired Lecoq.

"Don't the facts prove that beyond a doubt?" retorted Tabaret. "If they had been friends, the magistrate might have acted in the same manner; but then the prisoner wouldn't have attempted to strangle himself. But thanks to you; his life was saved; for he owes his life to you. During the night, confined in a straight-waistcoat, he was powerless to injure himself. Ah! how he must have suffered that night! What agony! So, in the morning, when he was conducted to the magistrate's room for examination, it was with a sort of frenzy that he dashed into the dreaded presence of his enemy. He expected to find M. d'Escorval there, ready to triumph over his misfortunes; and he intended to say: 'Yes, it's I. There is a fatality in it. I have killed three men, and I am in your power. But there is a mortal feud between us, and for that very reason you haven't the right to prolong my tortures! It would be infamous cowardice if you did so.' However, instead of M. d'Escorval, he sees M. Segmuller. Then what happens? He is surprised, and his eyes betray the astonishment he feels when he realizes the generosity of his enemy—an enemy from whom he had expected no indulgence. Then a smile comes to his lips—a smile of hope; for he thinks, since M. d'Escorval has not betrayed his secret, that he may be able to keep it, and emerge, perhaps, from this shadow of shame and crime with his name and honor still untarnished."

Old Tabaret paused, and then, with a sudden change of tone and an ironical gesture, he added: "And that—is my explanation."

Father Absinthe had risen, frantic with delight. "Cristi!" he exclaimed, "that's it! that's it!"

Lecoq's approbation was none the less evident although unspoken. He could appreciate this rapid and wonderful work of induction far better than his companion.

For a moment or two old Tabaret reclined upon his pillows enjoying the sweets of admiration; then he continued: "Do you wish for further proofs, my boy? Recollect the perseverance M. d'Escorval displayed in sending to M. Segmuller for information. I admit that a man may have a passion for his profession; but not to such an extent as that. You believed that his leg was broken. Then were you not surprised to find a magistrate, with a broken limb, suffering mortal anguish, taking such wonderful interest in a miserable murderer? I haven't any broken bones, I've only got the gout; but I know very well that when I'm suffering, half the world might be judging the other half, and yet the idea of sending Mariette for information would never occur to me. Ah! a moment's reflection would have enabled you to understand the reason of his solicitude, and would probably have given you the key to the whole mystery."

Lecoq, who was such a brilliant casuist in the Widow Chupin's hovel, who was so full of confidence in himself, and so earnest in expounding his theories to simple Father Absinthe —Lecoq hung his head abashed and did not utter a word. But he felt neither anger nor impatience.

He had come to ask advice, and was glad that it should be given him. He had made many mistakes, as he now saw only too plainly; and when they were pointed out to him he neither fumed nor fretted, nor tried to prove that he had been right when he had been wrong. This was certainly an excellent trait in his character.

Meanwhile, M. Tabaret had poured out a great glass of some cooling drink and drained it. He now resumed: "I need not remind you of the mistake you made in not compelling Toinon Chupin to tell you all she knew about this affair while she was in your power. 'A bird in the hand'—you know the proverb."

"Be assured, Monsieur Tabaret, that this mistake has cost me enough to make me realize the danger of allowing a well-disposed witness's zeal to cool down."

"We will say no more about that, then. But I must tell you

that three or four times, at least, it has been in your power to clear up this mystery."

The oracle paused, awaiting some protestation from his disciple. None came, however. "If he says this," thought the young detective, "it must indeed be so."

This discretion made a great impression on old Tabaret, and increased the esteem he had conceived for Lecoq. "The first time that you were lacking in discretion," said he, "was when you tried to discover the owner of the diamond earring found at the Poivriere."

"I made every effort to discover the last owner."

"You tried very hard, I don't deny it; but as for making every effort—that's quite another thing. For instance, when you heard that the Baroness de Watchau was dead, and that all her property had been sold, what did you do?"

"You know; I went immediately to the person who had charge of the sale."

"Very well! and afterwards?"

"I examined the catalogue; and as, among the jewels mentioned, I could find none that answered the description of these diamonds, I knew that the clue was quite lost."

"There is precisely where you are mistaken!" exclaimed old Tirauclair, exultantly. "If such valuable jewels are not mentioned in the catalogue of the sale, the Baroness de Watchau could not have possessed them at the time of her death. And if she no longer possessed them she must have given them away or sold them. And who could she have sold them to? To one of her lady friends, very probably. For this reason, had I been in your place, I should have found out the names of her intimate friends; this would have been a very easy task; and then, I should have tried to win the favor of all the lady's-maids in the service of these friends. This would have only been a pastime for a good-looking young fellow like you. Then, I should have shown this earring to each maid in succession until I found one who said: 'That diamond belongs to my mistress,' or one who was seized with a nervous trembling."

"And to think that this idea did not once occur to me!" ejaculated Lecoq.

"Wait, wait, I am coming to the second mistake you made," retorted the oracle. "What did you do when you obtained possession of the trunk which May pretended was his? Why

you played directly into this cunning adversary's hand. How could you fail to see that this trunk was only an accessory article; a bit of 'property' got ready in 'mounting' the 'comedy'? You should have known that it could only have been deposited with Madame Milner by the accomplice, and that all its contents must have been purchased for the occasion."

"I knew this, of course; but even under these circumstances, what could I do?"

"What could you do, my boy? Well, I am only a poor old man, but I should have interviewed every clothier in Paris; and at last some one would have exclaimed: 'Those articles! Why, I sold them to an individual like this or that—who purchased them for one of his friends whose measure he brought with him.'"

Angry with himself, Lecoq struck his clenched hand violently upon the table beside him. *"Sacrebleu!"* he exclaimed, "that method was infallible, and so simple too! Ah! I shall never forgive myself for my stupidity as long as I live!"

"Gently, gently!" interrupted old Tirauclair. "You are going too far, my dear boy. Stupidity is not the proper word at all; you should say carelessness, thoughtlessness. You are young—what else could one expect? What is far less inexcusable is the manner in which you conducted the chase, after the prisoner was allowed to escape."

"Alas!" murmured the young man, now completely discouraged; "did I blunder in that?"

"Terribly, my son; and here is where I really blame you. What diabolical influence induced you to follow May, step by step, like a common policeman?"

This time Lecoq was stupefied. "Ought I to have allowed him to escape me?" he inquired.

"No; but if I had been by your side in the gallery of the Odeon, when you so clearly divined the prisoner's intentions, I should have said to you: 'This fellow, friend Lecoq, will hasten to Madame Milner's house to inform her of his escape. Let us run after him.' I shouldn't have tried to prevent his seeing her, mind. But when he had left the Hotel de Mariembourg, I should have added: 'Now, let him go where he chooses; but attach yourself to Madame Milner; don't lose sight of her; cling to her as closely as her own shadow, for she will lead you to the accomplice—that is to say—to the solution of the mystery.'"

"That's the truth; I see it now."

"But instead of that, what did you do? You ran to the hotel, you terrified the boy! When a fisherman has cast his bait and the fish are swimming near, he doesn't sound a gong to frighten them all away!"

Thus it was that old Tabaret reviewed the entire course of investigation and pursuit, remodeling it in accordance with his own method of induction. Lecoq had originally had a magnificent inspiration. In his first investigations he had displayed remarkable talent; and yet he had not succeeded. Why? Simply because he had neglected the axiom with which he started: "Always distrust what seems probable!"

But the young man listened to the oracle's "summing up" with divided attention. A thousand projects were darting through his brain, and at length he could no longer restrain himself. "You have saved me from despair," he exclaimed, "I thought everything was lost; but I see that my blunders can be repaired. What I neglected to do, I can do now; there is still time. Haven't I the diamond earring, as well as various effects belonging to the prisoner, still in my possession? Madame Milner still owns the Hotel de Mariembourg, and I will watch her."

"And what for, my boy?"

"What for? Why, to find my fugitive, to be sure!"

Had the young detective been less engrossed with his idea, he would have detected a slight smile that curved Papa Tirauclair's thick lips.

"Ah, my son! is it possible that you don't suspect the real name of this pretended buffoon?" inquired the oracle somewhat despondently.

Lecoq trembled and averted his face. He did not wish Tabaret to see his eyes. "No," he replied, "I don't suspect—"

"You are uttering a falsehood!" interrupted the sick man. "You know as well as I do, that May resides in the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, and that he is known as the Duc de Sairmeuse."

On hearing these words, Father Absinthe indulged in a hearty laugh: "Ah! that's a good joke!" he exclaimed. "Ah, ha!"

Such was not Lecoq's opinion, however. "Well, yes, Monsieur Tabaret," said he, "the idea *did* occur to me; but I drove it away."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because—because—"

"Because you would not believe in the logical sequence of your premises; but I am consistent, and I say that it seems impossible the murderer arrested in the Widow Chupin's drinking den should be the Duc de Sairmeuse. Hence, the murderer arrested there, May, the pretended buffoon, *is* the Duc de Sairmeuse!"

XXV

HOW this idea had entered old Tabaret's head, Lecoq could not understand. A vague suspicion had, it is true, flitted through his own mind; but it was in a moment of despair when he was distracted at having lost May, and when certain of Couturier's remarks furnished the excuse for any ridiculous suppostition. And yet now Father Tirauclair calmly proclaimed this suspicion—which Lecoq had not dared seriously to entertain, even for an instant—to be an undoubted fact.

"You look as if you had suddenly fallen from the clouds," exclaimed the oracle, noticing his visitor's amazement. "Do you suppose that I spoke at random like a parrot?"

"No, certainly not, but—"

"Tush! You are surprised because you know nothing of contemporary history. If you don't wish to remain all your life a common detective, like your friend Gevrol, you must read, and make yourself familiar with all the leading events of the century."

"I must confess that I don't see the connection."

M. Tabaret did not deign to reply. Turning to Father Absinthe, he requested the old detective, in the most affable tones, to go to the library and fetch two large volumes entitled: "General Biography of the Men of the Present Age," which he would find in the bookcase on the right. Father Absinthe hastened to obey; and as soon as the books were brought, M. Tabaret began turning the pages with an eager hand, like a person seeking some word in a dictionary.

"Esbayron," he muttered, "Escars, Escayrac, Escher, Escodica —at last we have it—Escorval! Listen attentively, my boy, and you will be enlightened."

This injunction was entirely unnecessary. Never had the young detective's faculties been more keenly on the alert. It was in an emphatic voice that the sick man then read: "Escorval (Louis-Guillaume, baron d').—Diplomatist and politician, born at Montaignac, December 3d, 1769; of an old family of lawyers. He was completing his studies in Paris at the outbreak of the Revolution and embraced the popular cause with all the ardor of youth. But, soon disapproving the excesses committed in the name of Liberty, he sided with the Reactionists, advised, perhaps, by Roederer, who was one of his relatives. Commended to the favor of the First Counsel by M. de Talleyrand, he began his diplomatic career with a mission to Switzerland; and during the existence of the First Empire he was entrusted with many important negotiations. Devoted to the Emperor, he found himself gravely compromised at the advent of the Second Restoration. At the time of the celebrated rising at Montaignac, he was arrested on the double charge of high treason and conspiracy. He was tried by a military commission, and condemned to death. The sentence was not executed, however. He owed his life to the noble devotion and heroic energy of a priest, one of his friends, the Abbe Midon, cure of the little village of Sairmeuse. The baron d'Escorval had only one son, who embraced the judicial profession at a very early age."

Lecoq was intensely disappointed. "I understand," he remarked. "This is the biography of our magistrate's father. Only I don't see that it teaches us anything."

An ironical smile curved old Tirauclair's lips. "It teaches us that M. d'Escorval's father was condemned to death," he replied. "That's something, I assure you. A little patience, and you will soon know everything."

Having found a new leaf, he recommenced to read: "Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Victor de Tingry, Duc de).—A French general and politician, born at the chateâu de Sairmeuse, near Montaignac, in 1758. The Sairmeuse family is one of the oldest and most illustrious in France. It must not be confounded with the ducal family of Sermeuse, whose name is written with an 'e.' Leaving France at the beginning of the Revolution, Anne de Sairmeuse began by serving in the army

of Conde. Some years later he offered his sword to Russia; and it is asserted by some of his biographers that he was fighting in the Russian ranks at the time of the disastrous retreat from Moscow. Returning to France with the Bourbons, he became notorious by the intensity of his ultra-royalist opinions. It is certain that he had the good fortune to regain possession of his immense family estates; and the rank and dignities which he had gained in foreign lands were confirmed. Appointed by the king to preside at the military commission charged with arresting and trying the conspirators of Montaignac his zeal and severity resulted in the capture and conviction of all the parties implicated."

Lecoq sprang up with sparkling eyes. "I see it clearly now," he exclaimed. "The father of the present Duc de Sairmeuse tried to have the father of the present M. d'Escorval beheaded."

M. Tabaret was the picture of complacency. "You see the assistance history gives," said he. "But I have not finished, my boy; the present Duc de Sairmeuse also has his article which will be of interest to us. So listen: Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Martial)—Son of the preceding, was born in London toward the close of the last century; received his early education in England, and completed it at the Court of Austria, which he subsequently visited on several confidential missions. Heir to the opinions, prejudices, and animosities of his father, he placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at a time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most unpopular measures. The hostility he encountered, however eventually obliged him to retire from office, leaving behind him animosities likely to terminate only with his life."

The sick man closed the book, and with assumed modesty, he asked: "Ah, well! What do you think of my little method of induction?"

But Lecoq was too much engrossed with his own thoughts to reply to this question. "I think," he remarked, "that if the Duc de Sairmeuse had disappeared for two months—the period of May's imprisonment, all Paris would have known of it—and so—"

"You are dreaming," interrupted Tabaret. "Why with his wife and his valet de chambre for accomplices, the duke could

absent himself for a year if he liked, and yet all his servants would believe him to be in the house."

"I admit that," said Lecoq, at last; "but unfortunately, there is one circumstance which completely upsets the theory we have built up so laboriously."

"And what is that if you please?"

"If the man who took part in the broil at the Poivriere had been the Duc de Sairmeuse, he would have disclosed his name—he would have declared that, having been attacked, he had only defended himself—and his name alone would have opened the prison doors. Instead of that, what did the prisoner do? He attempted to kill himself. Would a grand seigneur, like the Duc de Sairmeuse, to whom life must be a perpetual enchantment, have thought of committing suicide?"

A mocking whistle from the old Tabaret interrupted the speaker. "You seem to have forgotten the last sentence in his biography: 'M. Sairmeuse leaves behind him ill-will and hatred.' Do you know the price he might have been compelled to pay for his liberty! No—no more do I. To explain his presence at the Poivriere, and the presence of a woman, who was perhaps his wife, who knows what disgraceful secrets he would have been obliged to reveal? Between shame and suicide, he chose suicide. He wished to save his name and honor intact."

Old Tirauclair spoke with such vehemence that even Father Absinthe was deeply impressed, although, to tell the truth, he had understood but little of the conversation.

As for Lecoq, he rose very pale, his lips trembling a little. "You will excuse my hypocrisy, Monsieur Tabaret," he said in an agitated voice. "I only offered these last objections for form's sake. I had thought of what you now say, but I distrusted myself, and I wanted to hear you say it yourself." Then with an imperious gesture, he added: "Now, I know what I have to do."

Old Tabaret raised his hands toward heaven with every sign of intense dismay. "Unhappy man!" he exclaimed; "do you think of going to arrest the Duc de Sairmeuse! Poor Lecoq! Free, this man is almost omnipotent, and you, an infinitesimal agent of police, would be shattered as easily as glass. Take care, my boy, don't attack the duke. I wouldn't be responsible for the consequences. You might imperil your life."

The young detective shook his head. "Oh! I don't deceive myself," said he. "I know that the duke is far beyond my reach—at least for the present. But he will be in my power again, the day I learn his secret. I don't fear danger; but I know, that if I am to succeed, I must conceal myself, and so I will. Yes, I will remain in the shade until I can unveil this mystery; but then I shall reappear in my true character. And if May be really the Duc de Sairmeuse, I shall have my revenge."

THE HONOR OF THE NAME

THE HONOR OF THE NAME

ON the first Sunday in the month of August, 1815, at ten o'clock precisely, the sacristan of the parish church of Sairmeuse gave, according to custom, three successive pulls at the bell—placed high in the tower above—to warn the faithful that the priest was about to ascend the steps of the altar to celebrate high mass. The church was already more than half-full, and from every side came groups of peasants, hurrying toward the churchyard. The women were all in their bravest attire, with dainty 'kerchiefs crossed upon their breasts, broad-striped, brightly colored skirts, reaching to their ankles, and large white caps set upon their heads. Being of an economical mind, although coquettish, they mostly came barefooted, carrying their shoes in their hands, and only putting them on as they were about to enter the house of worship.

But few of the men went into the church. They remained outside to talk, seating themselves in the porch, or standing about the yard, in the shade of the grand old elms. For such was the custom in the village of Sairmeuse. The two hours which the women consecrated to prayer the men employed in discussing the news, the success or failure of the crops; and, before the service came to a close, they could generally be found, glass in hand, in the long public room of the village hostelry.

For the farmers for a league around, Sunday mass at Sairmeuse was only an excuse for meeting together to hold, as it were, a kind of weekly exchange. Since the reestablishment of religion all the cures who had been successively stationed at Sairmeuse had endeavored to put an end to this scandalous habit of turning God's acre into an exchange, but all their efforts had proved unavailing. The obstinate peasantry would only make one concession. At the moment of the elevation of the Host, all voices outside the church were hushed, heads uncovered, and a few of the less skeptical farmers even bowed the

knee, and made the sign of a cross. But this was the affair of an instant only, and then conversation anent crops, cattle, wine, wood and so on was resumed with increased vivacity.

But on that particular Sunday in August the usual animation was wanting; and the comments exchanged among little knots of villagers gathered here and there among the tombstones under the trees were scarcely audible. Ordinarily there would have been no dearth of noisy discussions between the various buyers and sellers—discussions well-nigh interminable, and punctuated at frequent intervals with some loud spoken popular oath, such as "By my faith in God!" or "May the devil burn me!" To-day, however, the farmers were not talking, they were whispering together. Each face was sad; lips were placed cautiously at each listener's ear; and anxiety could be read in every eye. Evidently some great misfortune had occurred.

In point of fact, only a month had elapsed since Louis XVIII had been, for the second time, installed at the Tuileries by the efforts of a triumphant coalition. The earth had scarcely had time to imbibe the blood that had flowed at Waterloo; twelve hundred thousand foreign soldiers desecrated the soil of France; and a Prussian general was Governor of Paris.

The peasantry of Sairmeuse trembled with indignation and fear. This king, brought back by the Allies, was no less to be dreaded than the Allies themselves. To these non-political country folks, the great name of Bourbon only signified a terrible burden of taxation and oppression. Above all, it signified ruin for there was scarcely one among them who had not purchased from the government of the revolution or the Empire some patch of the land confiscated after the downfall of Louis XVI; and now it was currently reported that all the estates would have to be surrendered to the former landowners, who had emigrated when the Bourbons were overthrown.

Hence, it was with feverish curiosity that most of the Sairmeuse peasants clustered round a young man who, only two days before, had returned from the army. With tears of rage in his eyes, he was recounting the shame and misery of the invasion. He described the pillage at Versailles, the exactions at Orleans, and the pitiless requisitions of the Allied army.

"And these cursed foreigners to whom the traitors have delivered us will remain here," he exclaimed, "as long as there's a sou and a bottle of wine left in France!" So speaking, he

shook his clenched fist menacingly at a white flag that floated from the tower of the church.

His generous anger won the close attention of his audience, who were still listening to him with undiminished interest, when the sound of a horse's hoofs resounded on the stones of the one long street of Sairmeuse. A shudder passed through the crowd, and the same fear slackened the beating of every heart. Who could say but what this rider was not some English or Prussian officer, who had come perhaps to announce the arrival of his regiment, and to demand, with all a conqueror's harshness, money, food, and clothing for his men?

But the suspense was not of long duration. Instead of a uniform the rider wore a soiled blue blouse, and in lieu of a charger with military trappings, he bestrode a saddleless, bony, nervous little mare, covered with foam, which he was urging forward with repeated blows of an improvised whip.

"Ah! it's Father Chupin," murmured one of the peasants with a sigh of relief.

"The same," observed another. "He seems to be in a terrible hurry."

"The old rascal has probably stolen the horse he is riding," remarked a third.

This last remark revealed the reputation that the rider of the saddleless mare enjoyed among his neighbors. He was, in fact, one of those rascals who are the scourge and terror of rural districts. He pretended to be a day-laborer, but in reality he held all work in holy horror, and spent most of his time idling about his hovel. Indeed, he and his wife and their two sons—terrible youths who, somehow, had escaped the conscription—lived entirely by theft. Everything they consumed was stolen; wheat, wine, fuel, fruits—all being the property of others, while poaching and fishing in closed time furnished them with ready money. Every one in the neighborhood was aware of this; and yet when Father Chupin was pursued and captured, as occasionally happened, no one could ever be found to testify against him.

"He's such a dangerous fellow," the peasantry remarked. "If any one denounced him, why, on leaving prison he would simply lie in ambush and send an ounce of lead into his enemy's brains."

While the farmers assembled in the churchyard were thus exchanging comments concerning him, the rider of the saddle-

less mare had drawn rein in front of the local hostelry—the inn of the Bœuf Couronne or Crowned Bull. Alighting from his steed and crossing the square he walked toward the church.

He was a tall man of fifty or thereabouts, and as gnarled and sinewy as the stem of some ancient vine. At the first glance he would not have been taken for a scoundrel, for his demeanor was humble and even gentle. The restlessness of his eyes and the expression of his thin lips betrayed, however, a spirit of diabolical cunning and calculation. At any other moment this half-despised, half-dreaded individual would have been avoided; but curiosity and anxiety now led the crowd toward him.

"Ah, well, Father Chupin!" cried the peasants, as soon as he was within hearing, "where do you come from in such a tremendous haste?"

"From the city." To the inhabitants of Sairmeuse and its environs "the city" meant the chief town of the arrondissement, Montaignac, a charming subprefecture of eight thousand souls, about four leagues distant. "And did you buy the horse you were riding just now at Montaignac?"

"I didn't buy it: it was lent to me."

Coming from such a rascal this was so strange an assertion that his listeners could not repress a smile. He did not seem, however, to notice their incredulity.

"It was lent me," he continued, "in order that I might bring some great news here as quickly as possible."

For a moment a vague fear struck the inquisitive farmers dumb. "Is the enemy in the city?" one of the more timid eventually inquired in an anxious tone.

"Yes, but not the enemy you mean. The new arrival is our old lord of the manor, his grace the Duc de Sairmeuse."

"What! why, people said he was dead."

"They were mistaken."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, I have not seen him, but some one else has seen him for me, and has spoken to him. And this some one is M. Laugeron, the landlord of the Hotel de France at Montaignac. I was passing the house this morning, when he called me. 'Here, old fellow,' said he, 'will you do me a favor?' Naturally I replied I would, whereupon he placed a coin in my hand and said: 'Well, go round to the stable and tell them to saddle a horse for you, then gallop to Sairmeuse as fast as you can and tell my friend Lacheneur that the Duc de Sairmeuse arrived

here last night in a post-chaise, with his son Monsieur Martial, and two servants.'" Father Chupin paused. "The news was important," said he. "And as there wasn't an ostler in the stable and I couldn't find a saddle, I came here as quickly as I could on the beast's bare back."

The peasants were listening with pale cheeks and set teeth, and Father Chupin strove to preserve the subdued mien appropriate to a messenger of misfortune. But if one had observed him carefully, a swiftly repressed smile of irony might have been detected on his lips, and a gleam of malicious joy in his eyes. He was, in fact, inwardly jubilant, for at that moment he was having his revenge for all the slights and all the scorn he had been forced to endure. And what a revenge it was! If his words seemed to fall slowly and reluctantly from his lips, it was only because he was trying to prolong the sufferings of his audience as much as possible.

However, a stalwart young peasant, with an intelligent face, who, perhaps, read the old rascal's secret heart, bruskly interrupted him: "What can we care for the presence of the Duc de Sairmeuse at Montaignac?" said he. "Let him remain at the Hotel de France as long as he chooses; we shan't go in search of him."

"No! we shan't go in search of him," echoed the other peasants approvingly.

The old rogue shook his head with affected commiseration. "The duke will not put you to that trouble," he replied; "he will be here in less than a couple of hours."

"How do you know that?"

"I know it through M. Laugeron, who, just as I was starting, said: 'Above all, old man, explain to my friend Lacheneur that the duke has ordered horses to be ready to take him to Sairmeuse at eleven o'clock.'"

With a common impulse all the peasants who had watches consulted them.

"And what does he want here?" asked the same young farmer who had spoken before.

"Excuse me, but he didn't tell me," replied Father Chupin, "though one need not be very cunning to guess. He comes to revisit his former estates, and to take them from those who have purchased them, if possible. From you, Rousselet, he will claim the meadows on the Oiselle, which always yield two crops; from you, Father Gauchais, the ground on which the

Croix-Brulee stands; from you, Chanlouineau, the vineyards on the Borderie—"

Chanlouineau was the impetuous young fellow who had twice interrupted Father Chupin already. "Claim the Borderie!" he exclaimed, with even greater violence than before, "let him try—and we'll see. It was waste land when my father bought it—covered with briers; why, a goat couldn't have found pasture there. We have cleared it of stones, we have scratched up the soil with our very nails, watered it with our sweat, and now this duke wants to take it from us! Ah! he shall have my last drop of blood first."

"I don't say but—"

"But what? Is it any fault of ours if the nobles fled to foreign lands? We haven't stolen their lands, have we? The government offered them for sale; we bought them, and paid for them; they are lawfully ours."

"That's true; but M. de Sairmeuse is the great friend of the king."

The young soldier whose voice had aroused the most noble sentiments only a moment before was now no longer remembered. Invaded France, the threatening enemy, were alike forgotten. The all-powerful instinct of avarice had been suddenly aroused.

"In my opinion," resumed Chanlouineau, "we had better consult the Baron d'Escorval."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the peasants; "let us go at once!"

They were starting, when a villager who sometimes read the papers checked them with the remark: "Take care what you are about. Don't you know that since the return of the Bourbons M. d'Escorval is of no account whatever? Fouche has him on the proscription list, and he is under the surveillance of the police."

This objection dampened the general enthusiasm. "That's true," murmured some of the older men, "a visit to M. d'Escorval would, perhaps, do us more harm than good. And, besides, what advice could he give us?"

Chanlouineau had forgotten all prudence. "What of that!" he exclaimed. "If M. d'Escorval has no advice to give us about this matter, he can, perhaps, teach us how to resist and to defend ourselves."

For some moments Father Chupin had been studying, with a placid countenance, the storm of anger he had aroused. In

his secret heart he experienced an incendiary's satisfaction at the sight of the flames he had kindled, perhaps he already had a presentiment of the infamous part he would play a *few* months later. However, satisfied with his experiment, he now thought fit to assume the rôle of moderator.

"Wait a little. Don't cry before you are hurt," he exclaimed in an ironical tone. "Who told you that the Duc de Sairmeuse would trouble you? How much of his former domain do you all own between you? Almost nothing. A few fields and meadows, and a hill on the Borderie. All these together didn't yield him five thousand livres a year in the old days."

"Yes, that's true," replied Chanlouineau; "and if the revenue you mention is now four times as much it is only because the land is in the hands of forty farmers who cultivate it themselves."

"Which is another reason why the duke is not likely to say a word; he won't wish to set the whole district in commotion. In my opinion he will only proceed against one person—against our late mayor—M. Lacheneur, in short." Ah! the wily poacher knew only too well the egotism of his compatriots. He knew with what complacency and eagerness they would accept an expiatory victim whose sacrifice would be their salvation.

"That's a fact," remarked an old man; "M. Lacheneur owns nearly all the Sairmeuse property."

"Say all, while you are about it," rejoined Father Chupin. "Where does M. Lacheneur live? Why, in the beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse, whose towers we can see there through the trees. He hunts in the forests which once belonged to the Duc de Sairmeuse; he fishes in their lakes; he drives the horses that once belonged to them, seated in the carriages on which one might still see their coat-of-arms, if it hadn't been painted out. Twenty years ago Lacheneur was a poor devil like myself; now he's a grand gentleman with a princely income. He wears the finest broadcloth and top-boots just like the Baron d'Escorval. Instead of working himself he makes others work for him, and when he passes by every one must bow to the earth. If you kill so much as a sparrow on his lands he will have you thrown into prison. Ah, he has been a lucky fellow. The emperor made him mayor. The Bourbons deprived him of his office; but what does that matter to him?

He is still the real master here, just as the dukes were in other days. His son is pursuing his studies in Paris, with the intention of becoming a notary. As for his daughter, Mademoiselle Marie-Anne—"

"Not a word against her!" exclaimed Chanlouineau; "if she were mistress, there wouldn't be a poor man in the neighborhood. Ask your wife if that isn't the case, Father Chupin."

This was an affront which the rascal Chupin would never forget as long as he lived; still for the moment he swallowed it without any show of outward resentment. "I don't say that Mademoiselle Marie-Anne is not generous," he replied with affected humility, "but after all her charitable work, she has plenty of money left for her fine dresses and other fancies. I think M. Lacheneur might be very well content to give the duke back half or even three-quarters of the property he acquired no one ever knew how. He would still have enough left to grind the poor under foot."

After appealing to selfishness, Father Chupin now appealed to envy. There could be no doubt of his success. But he had no time to pursue his advantage. Mass was over, and the worshipers were leaving the church. Soon there stood on the threshold of the porch the man he had alluded to—M. Lacheneur—mayor of Sairmeuse in the days of the vanquished emperor. A young girl of dazzling beauty leaned upon his arm. Father Chupin walked straight toward him and bruskly delivered his message. M. Lacheneur staggered beneath the blow. He turned first so red, and then so frightfully pale that those around him thought he was about to fall. But he quickly recovered his self-possession, and without a word to the messenger, walked rapidly away, leading his daughter with him.

Some minutes later an old post-chaise, drawn by four horses, dashed through the village at a gallop, and paused before the curé's house. Then one might have witnessed a singular spectacle. Father Chupin had gathered his wife and sons together, and the four surrounded the carriage, shouting with all the power of their lungs:

"Long live the Duc de Sairmeuse!"

II

A GENTLY inclined road, more than two miles in length, shaded by a quadruple row of venerable elms, leads from the village to the Chateau de Sairmeuse. Nothing could be more beautiful than this avenue, a fit approach to a palace; and the stranger who beheld it would at once understand the popular proverb of the district: "He does not know the real beauty of France who has never seen Sairmeuse nor the Oiselle." The Oiselle is a little river crossed by a wooden bridge on leaving the village, and the clear rapid waters of which give a delicious freshness to the valley. At every step as one ascends the avenue the view changes. It is as if an enchanting panorama were being slowly unrolled before one. On the right the saw-pits of Fereol and the wind-mills of La Reche may be perceived. On the left the tree-tops of the forest of Dolomieu tremble in the breeze. Those imposing ruins across the river are all that remain of the feudal castle of the house of Breulh. That red brick mansion, with granite trimmings, half concealed by a bend in the stream, belongs to the Baron d'Escorval. And if the day is clear, one can easily distinguish the spires of Montaignac in the distance.

This was the road taken by M. Lacheneur after Chupin had delivered his message. But what did the late mayor of Sairmeuse care for the beauties of the landscape! Standing under the church porch he had received his death wound; and now, with a tottering step, he dragged himself along like some poor soldier, mortally wounded upon the field of battle, who searches for a ditch or quiet nook where to lie down and die. He seemed to have lost all thought of the surroundings—all consciousness of previous events. He pursued his way, lost in his reflections, and guided only by force of habit. Two or three times his daughter, who was walking by his side, tried to speak to him; but an "Ah! let me alone!" uttered in a harsh tone, was the only reply she obtained. Evidently M. Lacheneur had received a terrible blow; and undoubtedly, as often happens

under such circumstances, the unfortunate man was reviewing all the different phases of his life.

At twenty he was only a poor plowboy in the service of the Sairmeuse family. His ambition was modest then; and stretched beneath a tree at the hour of noonday rest he indulged in dreams as simple as his calling. "If I could but amass a hundred pistoles," he thought, "I would ask Father Barrios for the hand of his daughter Martha; and he wouldn't refuse me."

A hundred pistoles! A thousand francs!—an enormous sum for one who, during two years of toil and privation had only laid by eleven louis, placed carefully in a tiny box and hidden in the depth of his straw mattress. Still, he did not despair, for he had read in Martha's eyes that she would wait. And Mademoiselle Armande de Sairmeuse, a rich old maid, was his godmother; and he thought, if he attracted her adroitly, that he might, perhaps, interest her in his love affair.

Then suddenly the terrible storm of the Revolution burst over France. With the fall of the first thunderbolts, the Duc de Sairmeuse left France with the Comte d'Artois. They took refuge in foreign lands much after the same fashion as a passer-by might seek shelter in a doorway from a summer shower, saying to himself: "This will not last long." The storm did last, however, and the following year Mademoiselle Armande, who had remained at Sairmeuse, died. The chateau was then closed, the president of the district took possession of the keys in the name of the government, and the servants became scattered in various parts.

Lacheneur took up his residence in Montaignac. Young, daring, and personally attractive, blessed with an energetic face, and an intelligence far above his station, it was not long before he became well known in the political clubs. For three months indeed Lacheneur was the virtual dictator of Montaignac.

But this profession of public agitator is seldom lucrative; hence the surprise throughout the district was immense when people learned that the former plowboy had purchased the chateau and almost all the land belonging to his former masters. It is true that the nation had sold this princely domain for scarcely a twentieth part of its real value. It had been valued at sixty-nine thousand francs. To sell it for so beggarly an amount was equivalent to giving it away. And yet it was necessary to have this sum, and strange to say the apparently

penniless Lacheneur possessed it, since he had poured a flood of beautiful louis d'or into the hands of the receiver of the district.

From that moment his popularity waned. The patriots who had applauded the plowboy cursed the capitalist. He discreetly left his former friends to recover from their rage as best they could, and returned to Sairmeuse. There every one bowed low before Citoyen Lacheneur. Unlike most people, he did not forget his past hopes at the moment when they might be realized. He married Martha Barrios, and leaving the country to work out its own salvation without his assistance, he gave his time and attention to agriculture.

Any close observer in those days would have surmised that the man was bewildered by the sudden change in his situation. His manner was so troubled and anxious that, to see him, he would have been taken for a servant in constant fear of being detected in some indiscretion. At first he did not open the chateau, but installed himself and his young wife in the cottage formerly occupied by the head gamekeeper, near the entrance of the park. But, little by little, with the habit of possession came assurance. The Consulate had succeeded the Directory, the Empire succeeded the Consulate, and Citoyen Lacheneur became Monsieur Lacheneur. Appointed mayor two years later, he left the cottage and took possession of the chateau. The former plowboy slept in the bed of the Ducs de Sairmeuse; he ate off the massive plate bearing their escutcheon; and he received his visitors in the same magnificent suite of rooms where the proud peers had received their friends in the years gone by.

To those who had known him in former days, M. Lacheneur had become unrecognizable. He had adapted himself to his lofty station. Blushing at his own ignorance, he had had the courage—wonderful in one of his age—to acquire the education which he lacked. Then all his undertakings were successful to such a degree that his good luck had become proverbial. It sufficed for him to take any part in an enterprise for it to turn out well. The blessings of wedded life, moreover, were not denied him, for his wife had given him two lovely children, a son and a daughter; while, on the other hand, his property, managed with a shrewdness and sagacity the former owners had not possessed, yielded a princely income.

How many under similar circumstances would have lost their

heads! But Lacheneur retained all his habitual coolness. In spite of the luxury that surrounded him, his own habits continued simple and frugal. He never had an attendant for his own person. His large income was almost entirely consecrated to the improvement of the estate or to the purchase of more land. And yet he was not avaricious. In all that concerned his wife or children he did not count the cost. His son Jean had been educated in Paris, for he wished him to be fitted for any position. Unwilling to consent to a separation from his daughter, he had entrusted her to the care of a resident governess. Sometimes his friends accused him of an inordinate ambition for his children; but at any such remarks he would sadly shake his head and reply: "All I want is to insure them a modest and comfortable future, though it is folly indeed to count upon the time to come. Thirty years ago who would have foreseen that the Sairmeuse family would ever be deprived of their estates?"

With such opinions he should have been a good master; and such he was, though no one ever thought better of him on that account. His former comrades could not forgive him for his sudden elevation, and seldom spoke of him without wishing his ruin in ambiguous language.

Alas! evil days were to come. Toward the close of the year 1812 he lost his wife, while the disasters of 1813 swept away a large portion of his personal fortune, invested in a manufacturing enterprise. At the advent of the First Restoration, he was obliged to conceal himself for a time; and to cap the climax the conduct of his son, who was still in Paris, caused him serious disquietude. He already believed himself the most unfortunate of men, and now here was another misfortune threatening him—a misfortune so terrible that all the others were forgotten in the contemplation of it. Twenty years had elapsed since the day he had purchased Sairmeuse. Twenty years! And yet it seemed to him only yesterday that, blushing and trembling, he had laid those piles of louis d'or on the desk of the district receiver. Had he dreamed it? No, he had not dreamed it. His whole life, with its struggles and miseries, its hopes and fears, its unexpected joys and blighted hopes, passed in review before him.

Lost in these memories, he had quite forgotten the present situation, when a commonplace incident, more powerful than his daughter's voice, brought him back to the threatening real-

ity. The park gate leading to the Chateau de Sairmeuse, to *his* chateau, was locked. He shook it violently in a fit of rage, and being unable to break the lock, found some relief in breaking the bell.

On hearing the noise, a gardener hastened to the spot.

"Why is this gate closed?" demanded M. Lacheneur, with unwonted violence of manner. "By what right do you barricade my house when I, the master, am out of doors?"

The gardener tried to make some excuse. "Hold your tongue!" interrupted his master. "I dismiss you; you are no longer in my service."

Leaving the bewildered gardener to his astonishment, he walked on through the pleasure grounds—past the velvet lawns fringed with summer flowers and dense patches of shrubbery. In the vestibule, paved and paneled with mosaics of marble, three of his tenants sat awaiting him, for it was on Sunday that he always received those farmers who desired to confer with him. The three even rose at his approach, and deferentially doffed their hats. But he did not give them time to utter a word.

"Who allowed you to enter here?" he said in a savage voice, "and what do you desire? They sent you to play the spy on me, did they? Well, get out now and at once!"

The three farmers were even more bewildered than the gardener had been, and exchanged many comments of dismay. But M. Lacheneur did not hear them. Throwing open a sculptured door, he had dashed into the grand saloon followed by his frightened daughter.

Never had Marie-Anne seen her father in such a mood; and she fairly trembled, affected for the moment by the most terrible presentiments. She had heard it said that under the influence of some dire calamity men have sometimes suddenly lost their reason, and she was wondering if her father had become insane. Many might really have supposed that such was the case, for his eyes flashed, his lips twitched, and convulsive shudders shook his entire frame. He made the circuit of the drawing-room as a wild beast makes the circuit of its cage, uttering harsh imprecations and making frenzied gestures. His actions were quite incomprehensible. Sometimes he seemed to be trying the thickness of the carpet with the toe of his boot, and sometimes he threw himself on to a chair or a sofa as if to test their softness. Occasionally he paused abruptly before

one of the valuable pictures that covered the walls, or before some precious bronze; and one might have supposed him to be taking an inventory, and appraising all the marvels of art and upholstery which decorated this apartment, the most sumptuous in the chateau.

"And I must renounce all this!" he exclaimed at last. "No, never! never! never! I can not! I will not!"

Now, Marie-Anne was in a measure enlightened. But still she did not exactly know what was passing in her father's mind. Anxious for information, she left the low chair on which she had been sitting and went to his side. "Are you ill, father?" she asked, in her sweetest voice; "what is the matter? What do you fear? Why don't you confide in me—am I not your daughter? Don't you love me any longer?"

At the sound of this dear voice, M. Lacheneur trembled like a sleeper suddenly aroused from the terrors of nightmare, and cast an indescribable glance upon his daughter. "Did you not hear what Chupin said to me?" he replied slowly. "The Duc de Sairmeuse is at Montaignac—he will soon be here; and we are dwelling in the chateau of his fathers, and his domain has become ours!"

Marie-Anne was well acquainted with this vexed question of the national lands, a question which agitated France for thirty years, for she had heard it discussed a thousand times. "Ah, well! dear father," said she, "what does that matter, even if we do hold the property? You have bought it and paid for it, haven't you? So it is rightfully and lawfully ours."

M. Lacheneur hesitated a moment before replying. He had a secret which suffocated him; and was in one of those crises in which a man, however strong, totters and seeks for any support, however fragile. "You would be right, my daughter," he murmured with drooping head, "if the money I gave in exchange for Sairmeuse had really belonged to me."

At this strange avowal the young girl turned pale and recoiled a step. "What?" she faltered; "the gold wasn't yours, father? Whom did it belong to then? where did it come from?"

The unhappy man had gone too far to retract. "I will tell you everything, my dear girl," he replied, "and you shall be my judge. You shall decide everything. When the Sairmeuse family fled from France, I had only my hands to depend upon, and as it was almost impossible to obtain work, I wondered if

starvation were not near at hand. Such was my condition when some one came one evening to tell me that Mademoiselle Armande de Sairmeuse, my godmother, was dying, and wished to speak with me. I ran to the chateau. The messenger had told the truth. Mademoiselle Armande was sick unto death. I felt aware of this when I saw her lying on the bed, whiter than wax. Ah! if I were to live a hundred years, I should never forget the look that was on her face. It seemed to express a determination to hold death at bay until some task on which she had resolved had been performed. When I entered the room she seemed relieved. 'How long you were in coming!' she murmured. I was about to make some excuse, when she motioned me to pause, and ordered her nurses to leave the room. As soon as we were alone, 'You are an honest boy,' said she, 'and I am about to give you a proof of my confidence. People believe me to be poor, but they are mistaken. While my relatives were gaily ruining themselves, I was saving the five hundred louis which the duke allowed me every year. So saying, she motioned me to come nearer and kneel beside her bed. I obeyed, and then Mademoiselle Armande leaned toward me, fixed her lips to my ear, and added: 'I have saved eighty thousand francs.' I felt a sudden giddiness, but my godmother didn't notice it. 'This amount,' she continued, 'is not a quarter of the former income from our family estates. But now who knows but one day it may be the only resource of the Sairmeuses. I am going to place it in your charge, Lacheneur. I confide it to your honor and devotion. The estates belonging to the emigrants are to be sold, I hear. If such an act of injustice is committed, you will probably be able to purchase our property for seventy thousand francs. If the property is sold by the government, purchase it; but if the lands belonging to the emigrants are not sold, take seventy thousand francs to the duke, my nephew, who is with the Comte d'Artois. The surplus, that is to say, the ten thousand francs remaining, I give to you—they are yours.' When saying this she seemed to recover her strength. She raised herself up in bed, and holding the crucifix attached to her rosary against my lips, she added: 'Swear by the image of our Saviour that you will faithfully execute your dying godmother's last will.' I took the required oath, and an expression of satisfaction overspread her features."

M. Lacheneur paused. The recollection of this scene plainly

produced a deep impression on his mind. "In continuation," he said, "Mademoiselle Armande then told me she should die content. 'You will have a protector on high,' she said. 'But this is not all. In times like these, this gold will not be safe in your hands unless those about you are ignorant that you possess it. It is here in this cupboard at the head of my bed, in a small oak chest, which you must manage to remove without being seen. If you went out with it in your arms, people might wonder by and by what it contained. The best plan would be to fasten a sheet round it, and let it down gently from the window into the garden. You must then leave the house as you entered it, and as soon as you are outside, you must take the box and carry it home. The night is very dark, and no one will see you, if you are careful. But make haste; my strength is nearly gone.' I did as Mademoiselle Armande suggested, and less than ten minutes afterward I had lowered the box into the garden without the slightest noise. Closing the window, I exclaimed: 'I have done your bidding, godmother.' 'God be praised,' she whispered, 'Sairmeuse is saved!' I heard a deep sigh, and turning round found that she was dead."

M. Lacheneur shuddered as he uttered these last words. His emotion was intense, and for a moment he could not speak. Eventually, in a hollow voice, he exclaimed: "I called for aid —it came. Mademoiselle Armande was loved by every one; there was great lamentation, and half an hour of indescribable confusion. I was able to withdraw, unnoticed, to run into the garden, and carry away the box. An hour later, it was concealed in the miserable hovel I inhabited, and the following year I purchased Sairmeuse."

The unfortunate man paused again, he had confessed everything, and now stood trembling in front of his daughter trying to read his sentence in her eyes.

"And can you hesitate?" she asked.

"Ah! you don't know—"

"I know that Sairmeuse must be given up."

This was also the counsel of his own conscience, that faint voice which speaks only in a whisper, but which all the tumult on earth can not overpower. Still he hesitated. "No one saw me take away the chest," he faltered. "If any one suspected it, there is not a single proof against me. But no one does suspect it."

Marie-Anne rose, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "Oh! father! If others know nothing about it, can *you* forget it?"

M. Lacheneur did not immediately reply. He seemed to be inwardly wrestling with himself. "Restitution," he at last exclaimed. "Yes, then I will make restitution. I restitute what I received. I will give the duke the eighty thousand francs, with the interest on the amount ever since I have had it in my hands, and then we shall be quits!"

Marie-Anne shook her head. "Why resort to an unworthy subterfuge?" she asked in a gentle voice. "You know perfectly well that it was Sairmeuse itself that Mademoiselle Armande wished to entrust to the servant of her house. And it is Sairmeuse which must be returned."

The word "servant" was revolting to a man who, at least while the Empire lasted, had been a power in the land. "Ah! Marie, you are cruel," he replied with intense bitterness, "as cruel as a child who has never suffered—as cruel as one who, never having been tempted himself, is without mercy for those who have yielded to temptation. You tell me that I was but a trustee, and so indeed I formerly considered myself. If your dear mother were still alive, she would tell you the anxiety and anguish I felt on becoming the master of riches which were not mine. I was afraid of myself. I felt like some gambler to whom the winnings of others have been confided. Your mother could tell you that I moved heaven and earth to find the Duc de Sairmeuse. But he had left the Comte d'Artois, and no one knew where he had gone or what had become of him. Ten years passed before I could make up my mind to inhabit the chateau—yes, ten years—during which I had the furniture dusted each morning as if the master was to return that very evening. At last I ventured. I heard M. d'Escorval declare that the duke had been killed in battle. So I took up my abode here; and day after day as the domain of Sairmeuse grew more productive and extensive under my care, I felt myself more and more its rightful owner."

This fresh plea—this despairing appeal on behalf of a bad cause produced no impression on Marie-Anne's loyal heart. "Restitution must be made," she repeated.

Her father wrung his hands. "Without mercy!" he exclaimed; "she is without mercy. Unfortunate girl! doesn't she understand that it is for her sake I wish to remain where I am. I am old; familiar with toil and poverty; and my hands

are still hard and horny. What do I need to keep me alive till the time comes to lay me in the graveyard? A crust of bread and an onion in the morning, a bowl of soup at night, and a bundle of straw to sleep on. I could easily return to that. But you, unhappy child! and your brother, what will become of you both?"

"We must not discuss or haggle with duty, father," replied Marie-Anne. "I think, however, that you are needlessly alarmed. I believe the duke is too noble-hearted ever to allow you to want after the immense service you have rendered him."

The former plowboy of the house of Sairmeuse laughed a loud, bitter laugh. "You believe that!" said he. "Then you don't know the nobles who have been our masters for ages. My only reward will be some callous phrase: 'You're a worthy fellow,' or something of the kind, uttered just for form's sake; and you will see us—me at my plow, and you out at service. And if I venture to speak of the ten thousand francs that were given me, I shall be treated like an impostor or an impudent fool. I swear this shall not be!"

"Oh, father!"

"No! this shall not be. And I realize—as you can not realize—the disgrace of such a fall. You think you are beloved in Sairmeuse? You are mistaken. We have been too fortunate not to be the victims of hatred and jealousy. If I fall to-morrow, those who kissed your hands yesterday will be ready to tear you to pieces!"

Lacheneur's eyes glittered; he believed he had found a victorious argument. "And then," resumed he, "you yourself will realize the horror of the disgrace. It will cost you the deadly anguish of separating from the man your heart has chosen?"

At these words Marie-Anne's beautiful eyes filled with tears. "If what you say proves true, father," she murmured, in an altered voice, "I may, perhaps, die of sorrow; but I shall have to realize that my confidence and love were misplaced."

"And you still insist upon my returning Sairmeuse to its former owner?"

"Honor demands it, father."

M. Lacheneur struck the chair in which he was seated with a violent blow of his fist. "And if I continue obstinate," he exclaimed—"if I keep the property—what will you do then?"

"I shall say to myself, father, that honest poverty is better than stolen wealth. I shall leave the chateau, which belongs

to the Duc de Sairmeuse, and seek a situation as a servant in the neighborhood."

M. Lacheneur sank back in his chair sobbing. He knew his daughter's nature well enough to rest assured that she would do what she said. However, he was conquered; Marie-Anne had won the battle, and he had decided to make the heroic sacrifice she asked for.

"I will relinquish Sairmeuse," he faltered, "come what may—"

He paused suddenly, for a visitor had just opened the door unheard, and was now entering the room. The newcomer was a young man, twenty or thereabouts, of distinguished mien, but with a rather melancholy and gentle manner. On crossing the threshold his eyes met those of Marie-Anne, and a crimson flush mantled over both their faces.

"Sir," said this young fellow, "my father sends me to inform you that the Duc de Sairmeuse and his son have just arrived. They have asked the hospitality of our curé."

M. Lacheneur rose, unable to conceal his agitation. "You will thank the Baron d'Escorval for his attention, my dear Maurice," he replied. "I shall have the honor of seeing him to-day, after an important step which my daughter and I are about to take."

Young d'Escorval had seen at the first glance that his presence was inopportune, and accordingly he did not linger. But as he was taking leave, Marie-Anne found time and opportunity to say to him in a low voice: "I think I know your heart, Maurice; this evening I shall know it for certain."

III

FEW of the inhabitants of Sairmeuse knew, except by name, the terrible duke whose arrival had thrown the whole village into commotion. Some of the oldest residents had a faint recollection of having seen him long ago, before '89 indeed, when he came to visit his aunt, Mademoiselle Armande, though under the monarchy his duties had seldom permitted

him to leave the court. If he had given no signs of life during the Empire, it was mainly because he had escaped the humiliations and suffering which so many of the emigrants endured in exile. Indeed unlike most of his fellows he had received a princely fortune in exchange for the wealth of which the Revolution had deprived him.

Taking refuge in London after the defeat of the army of Conde, he had been so fortunate as to please the only daughter of one of the richest Catholic peers in England, and he had married her. She possessed a dowry of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling, more than six million francs. Still the marriage was not a happy one; for the chosen companion of the licentious Comte d'Artois not unnaturally proved a very indifferent husband. Indeed, the young duchess was contemplating a separation when she died, in giving birth to a little boy, who was baptized under the names of Anne-Marie-Martial.

The loss of his wife did not render the Duc de Sairmeuse inconsolable. He was free and richer than he had ever been. As soon therefore as etiquette permitted, he confided his son to the care of one of his wife's relations and began his roving life again. Rumor had told the truth. He had fought, and fought furiously, against France first in the Austrian and then in the Russian ranks. And he took no pains to conceal the fact, convinced that he had only performed his duty. He indeed considered that he had honestly and loyally gained the rank of general, granted him by the Emperor of all the Russias.

He had not returned to France during the First Restoration; but his absence had been involuntary. His father-in-law had just died, and the duke was detained in London by business connected with his son's immense inheritance. Then followed the "Hundred Days," by which he was exasperated. But "the good cause," as he styled it, having triumphed anew, he had at length hastened back to France.

Lacheneur had correctly estimated the character of the former lord of Sairmeuse, when he resisted his daughter's entreaties. The former plowboy had been compelled to conceal himself during the First Restoration, and he knew only too well that the returned *emigres* had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The Duc de Sairmeuse was no exception to the rule. He thought, and nothing could be more sadly absurd, that a mere act of authority would suffice to suppress forever all the

events of the Revolution and the Empire. When any of those who had seen Louis XVIII at the helm in 1814 assured the duke that France had changed in many respects since 1789, he responded with a shrug of the shoulders: "Nonsense! As soon as we assert ourselves all these rascals whose rebellion alarms you will quietly slink out of sight." And such was really his opinion.

On the road from Montaignac to Sairmeuse, his grace, comfortably ensconced in a corner of his traveling carriage, unfolded his theories for his son's benefit. "The king has been poorly advised," he said. "And indeed I am disposed to believe that he inclines too much to Jacobinism. If he would listen to my advice, he would use the twelve hundred thousand soldiers our friends have placed at his disposal, to bring his subjects to a proper sense of duty. Twelve hundred thousand bayonets have far more eloquence than all the clauses of a charter."

The duke continued his remarks in this strain until the vehicle approached Sairmeuse. Though but little given to sentiment, he was really affected by the sight of the district in which he had been born—where he had played as a child, and of which he had heard nothing since Mademoiselle Armande's death. Though change could be detected on every side, at least the outlines of the landscape remained the same, and the valley of the Oiselle was as bright and smiling as in days gone by.

"I recognize it!" exclaimed his grace with a momentary delight that made him forget politics. "I recognize it!"

Soon the changes became more striking. The vehicle had reached Sairmeuse, and rattled over the stones of the one long street. This street, in former years, had been unpaved, and had always been well-nigh impassable in wet weather.

"Ah, ha!" murmured the duke, "this is an improvement!"

It was not long before he noticed others. The dilapidated, thatched hovels of the old regime had given place to pretty, comfortable white cottages, with green blinds to the windows and vines hanging gracefully over the doors. Soon the church came in view with the white flag of the Bourbons floating according to royal command on the summit of the belfry tower. In the open square facing the house of worship groups of peasants were still engaged in anxious converse.

"What do you think of all these peasants?" inquired the

duke's son, the Marquis Martial de Sairmeuse. "Do you think they look like people who are preparing a triumphal reception for their old masters?"

The duke shrugged his shoulders. He was not the man to renounce an illusion for such a trifle. "They don't know that I am in this carriage," he replied. "When they know—" At this very moment loud shouts of "Vive Monseigneur le Duc de Sairmeuse!" interrupted him.

"Do you hear that, marquis?" he exclaimed; and pleased by these cries that proved he was in the right, he leaned from the carriage window, waving his hand to the honest Chupin family, who were running after the vehicle with noisy shouts. The old rascal, his wife, and his sons, all possessed powerful voices; and it was scarcely strange that the duke should believe that the whole village was welcoming him. He was indeed convinced of it; and when the vehicle stopped before the house of the cure, M. de Sairmeuse was firmly persuaded that the popularity of the nobility was even greater then than ever.

Upon the threshold of the parsonage, stood Bibaine, the village priest's old housekeeper. She knew who these guests must be, for a cure's servant always knows everything that is going on. "The cure has not yet returned from church," she said, in reply to the duke's inquiry; "but if the gentlemen would like to wait, it will not be long before he comes, for the poor dear man has not yet lunched."

"Then let us go in," the duke said to his son; and guided by the housekeeper, they entered a small sitting-room which M. de Sairmeuse appraised in a single glance. The aspect of a house reveals the habits of its master. Here everything was poor and bare, though scrupulously clean. The walls were white-washed; eight or ten chairs were ranged around, and the spoons and forks on the clothless table were of common pewter. This abode either belonged to a man of saintly character or one of intense ambition.

"Will these gentlemen take any refreshment?" inquired Bibaine.

"Upon my word," replied Martial, "I must confess that the drive has whetted my appetite amazingly."

"Blessed Jesus!" exclaimed the old housekeeper, in evident despair. "You wish to lunch. What am I to do? I have nothing! That is to say—yes—I have an old hen left in the coop. Give me time to wring its neck, to pick it and clean it—"

She paused to listen; footsteps could be heard in the passage. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "here comes our cure!"

The village priest of Sairmeuse, the Abbe Midon as he was called, was the son of a poor farmer in the environs of Montaignac, and owed his Latin and his tonsure to the privations of his family. Tall, angular, and solemn, he was as cold and impassive as a grave-stone

It was by immense efforts of will, and at the cost of great physical and mental torture that he had made himself what he was. Some idea of the terrible restraint to which he had subjected himself could be formed by looking at his eyes, which occasionally flashed with all the fire of an impassioned soul. Was he old or young? The most subtle observer would have hesitated to answer this question on looking at his pallid, emaciated face, cut in two by an immense nose—a real eagle's beak—as thin as the edge of a razor. He wore a long black robe, patched and darned in numberless places, but without a single spot or stain. This garment hung about his tall attenuated body like the damaged sails around the mast of some disabled ship.

At the sight of two strangers occupying his sitting-room, the village priest manifested some slight surprise. The vehicle standing at the door had announced the presence of some unusual visitor; but neither he nor the sacristan had been notified, and he wondered whom he had to deal with, and what was required of him. Mechanically he turned to Bibaine, but the old servant had taken flight.

The duke understood his host's astonishment. "Upon my word, abbe," he said, with the impertinent ease of a great nobleman, who makes himself at home everywhere, "we have taken your house by storm and hold the position, as you see. I am the Duc de Sairmeuse, and this is my son the marquis."

The priest bowed, but he did not seem very greatly impressed by his guest's exalted rank. "It is a great honor for me," he replied, in a more than reserved tone, "to receive a visit from the former master of this place."

He emphasized this word "former," in such a manner that it was impossible to doubt his sentiments and opinions. "Unfortunately," he continued, "you will not find here the comforts to which you are accustomed, and I fear—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the duke. "An old soldier is not fastidious, and what suffices for you, Monsieur l'Abbe, will

suffice for us. And rest assured that we shall amply repay you in one way or another for any inconvenience we may cause you."

The priest's eyes flashed. This want of tact, this disagreeable familiarity, this last insulting remark, kindled the anger of the man concealed beneath the priest.

"Besides," added Martial gaily, "we have been vastly amused by your housekeeper's anxieties, and already know that there is a chicken in the coop—"

"That is to say there was one, Monsieur le Marquis."

The old housekeeper, who suddenly reappeared, explained her master's reply. She seemed overwhelmed with despair. "Holy Virgin! what shall I do?" she clamored. "The chicken has disappeared. Some one has certainly stolen it, for the coop is securely closed!"

"Do not accuse your neighbors hastily," interrupted the cure; "no one has stolen it. Bertrand was here this morning to ask alms for her sick daughter. I had no money, so I gave her the fowl that she might make some good broth for the poor girl"

This explanation changed Bibaine's consternation to fury. Planting herself in the centre of the room, one hand on her hip, and the other pointing at her master, she cried in a loud voice, "That is just the sort of a man he is; he hasn't as much sense as a baby! Any miserable peasant who meets him can turn him round his little finger; and the bigger the falsehood the more readily the tears come to his eyes. And that's the way they take the very shoes off his feet and the bread from his mouth. As for Bertrand's daughter she's no more ill than I am!"

"Enough," said the priest sternly, "enough." Then, knowing by experience that his voice would not check her flood of reproaches, he took her by the arm and led her out into the passage.

The Duc de Sairmeuse and his son exchanged a glance of consternation. Was this a comedy prepared for their benefit? Evidently not, since their arrival had been unexpected. But the priest whose character had been so plainly revealed by this domestic quarrel, was not a man to their taste. At least, he was evidently not the man they had hoped to find—the auxiliary whose assistance was indispensable to the success of their plans. Still they did not exchange a word; but listened, waiting for what would follow.

They could hear a discussion in the passage. The master was speaking in a low tone, but with an unmistakable accent of command, and the servant uttered an astonished exclamation. No distinct word was, however, audible.

Soon the priest reentered the sitting-room. "I hope, gentlemen," he said, with a dignity calculated to check any attempt at sarcasm, "that you will excuse this ridiculous scene. The cure of Sairmeuse, thank God, is not so poor as his housekeeper pretends."

Neither the duke nor Martial made any reply. Their earlier assurance was very sensibly diminished; and M. de Sairmeuse deemed it advisable to change the subject. This he did by relating the events which he had just witnessed in Paris; profiting by the occasion to pretend that his majesty, Louis XVIII, had been welcomed back with enthusiastic transports of affection.

Fortunately, the old housekeeper interrupted this recital. She entered the room, loaded with china, spoons, forks, and bottles, and behind her came a tall man in a white apron, with three or four covered dishes in his hands. It was an order to go and obtain this repast from the village inn that had drawn from Bibaine so many exclamations of wonder and dismay in the passage.

A moment later the cure and his guests took their places at the table. Had the dinner merely consisted of the much-lamented chicken, the rations would have been bery "short." Indeed the worthy woman was herself obliged to confess this, on seeing the terrible appetites evinced by M. de Sairmeuse and his son. "One would have sworn that they hadn't eaten anything for a whole fortnight," she told her friends the next day.

The Abbe Midon was apparently not hungry, though it was now two o'clock, and he had eaten nothing since the previous evening. The sudden arrival of the former masters of Sairmeuse filled his heart with gloomy forebodings; and to his mind their coming presaged the greatest misfortunes. So while he played with his knife and fork, pretending to eat, he was really occupied in watching his guests, and in studying them with all a priest's penetration, which, by the way, is generally far superior to that of a physician or a magistrate.

The Duc de Sairmeuse was fifty-seven, but looked considerably younger. The storms of his youth, the dissipation of his viper years, the great excesses of every kind in which he had

indulged had failed to impair his iron constitution. Of herculean build, he was extremely proud of his strength, and of his hands, which were well formed, but large, firmly knit and powerful, such hands as rightfully belonged to a nobleman whose ancestors had dealt many a crushing blow with ponderous battle-ax and two-handed sword in the ancient days of chivalry. His face revealed his character. He possessed all the graces and all the vices of a courtier. He was at the same time witty and ignorant, skeptical as regards religion, and yet violently imbued with the authoritative prejudices of his class.

Though less robust than his father, Martial was quite as distinguished looking a cavalier. Young as he was, barely a man, he had already been the hero of many a love intrigue, and more than one beauty of renown at foreign courts had been smitten with the soft gleam of his large blue eyes, and the wavy locks of golden hair he inherited from his mother. To his father he owed energy, courage, and, it must also be added, perversity. But he was his superior in education and intellect. If he shared his father's prejudices, he had not adopted them without weighing them carefully. What the father might do in a moment of excitement, the son was capable of doing in cold blood.

It was thus that the abbe, with rare sagacity, read the character of his guests. So it was with sorrow, but without surprise, that he heard the duke advance, on the questions of the day, the impossible ideas that were shared by nearly all the returned *emigres*. Knowing the condition of the country, and the state of the public opinion, the cure endeavored to convince the obstinate nobleman of his mistake; but upon this subject the duke would not permit contradiction; and he was beginning to lose his temper, when Bibaine opportunely appeared at the parlor door.

"Monsieur le Duc," she said, "M. Lacheneur and his daughter are without and desire to speak to you."

This name of Lacheneur awakened no recollection in the duke's mind. First of all, he had never lived at Sairmeuse. And even if he had, what courtier of the *ancien regime* ever troubled himself about the individual names of his peasantry, whom he regarded with such profound indifference. When a nobleman addressed these people, he exclaimed: "Hello! hi there! my worthy fellow!"

Hence it was with the air of a man who is making an effort of memory that the Duc de Sairmeuse repeated: "Lacheneur—M. Lacheneur—"

But Martial, a closer observer than his father, had noticed that the priest's glance wavered at the mention of this name.

"Who is this person, abbe?" lightly asked the duke.

"M. Lacheneur," replied the priest with evident hesitation, "is the present owner of the Chateâu de Sairmeuse."

Martial, the precocious diplomat, could not repress a smile on hearing this reply, which he had foreseen. But the duke bounded from his chair. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "it's the rascal who had the impudence—Let him come in, old woman, let him come in."

Bibaine retired, and the priest's uneasiness increased. "Permit me, Monsieur le Duc," he hastily said, "to remark that M. Lacheneur exercises a great influence in this region—to offend him would be impolitic—"

"I understand—you advise me to be conciliatory. Such sentiments are those of a Jacobin. If his majesty listens to the advice of such as you, all these sales of confiscated estates will be ratified. Zounds! our interests are the same. If the Revolution has deprived the nobility of their property, it has also impoverished the clergy."

"The possessions of a priest are not of this world," coldly retorted the cure.

M. de Sairmeuse was about to make some impertinent rejoinder, when M. Lacheneur appeared, followed by his daughter. The wretched man was ghastly pale, great drops of perspiration coursed down his forehead, and his restless, haggard eyes revealed his distress of mind. Marie-Anne was as pale as her father, but her attitude and the light gleaming in her glance spoke of invincible energy and determination.

"Ah, well! friend," said the duke, "so you are the owner of Sairmeuse, it seems."

This was said with such a careless insolence of manner that the cure blushed that a man whom he considered his equal should be thus treated in his house. He rose and offered the visitors chairs. "Will you take a seat, dear Lacheneur?" said he, with a politeness intended as a lesson for the duke; "and you, also, mademoiselle, do me the honor—"

But the father and the daughter both refused the proffered civility with a motion of the head.

"Monsieur le Duc," continued Lacheneur, "I am an old servant of your house—"

"Ah! indeed!"

"Mademoiselle Armande, your aunt, did my poor mother the honor of acting as my godmother—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted the duke, "I remember you now. Our family has shown great kindness to you and yours. And it was to prove your gratitude, probably, that you made haste to purchase our estate!"

The former plowboy was of humble origin, but his heart and his character had developed with his fortunes; he understood his own worth. Much as he was disliked, and even detested, by his neighbors, every one respected him. And here was a man who treated him with undisguised scorn. Why? By what right? Indignant at the outrage, he made a movement as if to retire. No one, save his daughter, knew the truth; he had only to keep silent, and Sairmeuse remained his. Yes, he had still the power to keep Sairmeuse, and he knew it, for he did not share the fears of the ignorant rustics. He was too well informed not to be able to distinguish between the hopes of the *emigres* and the reality of their situation.

He knew that to place the returning noblemen perforce in repossession of their ancestral estates would imperil even the existence of the monarchy, despite the presence of all the foreign bayonets. A beseeching word, uttered in a low tone by his daughter, induced him, however, to turn again to the duke. "If I purchased Sairmeuse," he answered, in a voice husky with emotion, "it was in obedience to the command of your dying aunt, and with the money she gave me for that purpose. If you see me here, it is only because I come to restore to you the deposit confided to my keeping."

Any one not belonging to that class of spoiled fools who ordinarily surround a throne would have been deeply touched. But the duke thought this grand act of honesty and generosity the most simple and natural thing in the world.

"That's all very well, so far as the principal is concerned," said he. "But let us speak now of the interest. Sairmeuse, if I remember rightly, yielded an average income of one thousand louis per year. These revenues, well invested, should have amounted to a considerable amount. Where is it?"

This claim, thus advanced and at such a moment, was so outrageous, that Martial, disgusted, made a sign to his father

which the latter did not see. But the cure hoping to recall the grasping nobleman to something like a sense of shame, exclaimed: "Monsieur le Duc! Oh, Monsieur le Duc!"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. "The income I have partly used for my own living expenses, and the education of my children; but most of it has been expended in improving the estate, which to-day yields an income twice as large as in former years."

"That is to say, for twenty years, M. Lacheneur has played the part of lord of the manor. A delightful comedy. You are rich now, I suppose."

"I possess nothing at all. But I hope you will allow me to take ten thousand francs, which your aunt gave me."

"Ah! she gave you ten thousand francs. And when?"

"On the same evening that she gave me the seventy thousand francs intended for the purchase of the estate."

"Perfect! What proof can you furnish that she gave you this sum?"

Lacheneur stood motionless and speechless. He tried to reply, but could not. If he opened his lips it would only be to pour out a torrent of menace, insult, and invective.

Marie-Anne stepped quickly forward. "The proof, sir," she said, in a clear, ringing voice, "is the word of this man, who, of his own free will, comes to return to you—to give you a fortune."

As she sprang forward, her beautiful dark hair escaped from its confinement, her rich blood crimsoned her cheeks, her dark eyes flashed brilliantly, and sorrow, anger, horror at the humiliation imposed upon her father, imparted a sublime expression to her face. She was so beautiful that Martial gazed at her with absolute wonder. "Lovely!" he murmured in English; "beautiful as an angel!"

These words, which she understood, abashed Marie-Anne. But she had said enough; her father felt that he was avenged. He drew from his pocket a roll of papers and threw them upon the table.

"Here are your titles," he said, addressing the duke in a tone full of implacable hatred. "Keep the legacy your aunt gave me, I wish nothing of yours. I shall never set foot in Sairmeuse again. Penniless I entered it, penniless I will leave it!"

He walked out of the room with head proudly erect, and when

they were outside, he merely said to his daughter; "You see, I told you so!"

"You have done your duty," she replied; "it is those who haven't done theirs who are to be pitied!"

She had no opportunity to say more, for Martial came running after them, anxious for another chance of seeing this girl whose beauty had made such an immediate impression upon his mind. "I hastened after you," he said addressing Marie-Anne, rather than M. Lacheneur, "to reassure you. All this will be arranged, Mademoiselle. Eyes so beautiful as yours should never know tears. I will be your advocate with my father—"

"Mademoiselle Lacheneur has no need of an advocate!" interrupted a harsh voice.

Martial turned, and saw the young man who that morning had gone to warn M. Lacheneur of the duke's arrival. Accosting him, he exclaimed, in an insolent voice, "I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"And I," said the other quietly, "am Maurice d'Escorval."

They surveyed one another for a moment, each expecting, perhaps, an insult from the other. Instinctively, they felt they were to be enemies; and the glances they exchanged were full of animosity. Perhaps they had a presentiment that they were to be the champions of two different principles, as well as rivals in love.

Martial, remembering his father, yielded: "We shall meet again, M. d'Escorval," he said, as he retired.

At this threat, Maurice shrugged his shoulders, and replied, "You had better not desire it."

IV

THE residence of the Baron d'Escorval, the brick structure with stone dressings, seen from the avenue leading to the Chateau de Sairmeuse, was small and unpretentious. Its chief attraction was a pretty lawn extending to the banks of the Oiselle in front, and a small but shady park in the rear. It

was known as the Chateau d'Escorval, but such an appellation was a piece of the grossest flattery. Any petty manufacturer who has amassed a small fortune would desire a larger, handsomer, and more imposing structure for his residence.

M. d'Escorval—and history will record the fact to his honor—was not a rich man. Although he had been entrusted with several of those missions from which generals and diplomats often return laden with millions, his worldly possessions only consisted of the little patrimony bequeathed him by his father; a property which yielded an income of from twenty to twenty-five thousand francs a year. His modest dwelling, situated about a mile from Sairmeuse, represented ten years' savings. He had built it in 1806 from a plan drawn by his own hand, and it was the dearest spot he had on earth. He always hastened to this retreat when work allowed him a little rest, though on this occasion he had not come to Escorval of his own free will, for he had been compelled to leave Paris by the proscription list of July 24—that fatal list which summoned the valiant Ney, the enthusiastic Labedoyere, and the virtuous Drouot before a court-martial.

Even in the seclusion of his country seat, M. d'Escorval's situation was not without danger, for he was one of those who, some days before the disaster of Waterloo, had strongly urged the emperor to order the execution of Fouche, the former minister of police. Now, Fouche knew of this advice; and to-day he was all-powerful. Hence, M. d'Escorval's friends wrote to him from Paris to be very careful. But he put his trust in Providence, and faced the future, threatening though it was, with the unalterable serenity of a pure conscience.

The baron was still young; he was not yet fifty, but anxiety, work, and long nights passed in struggling with the most arduous difficulties of the imperial policy had aged him before his time. He was tall, slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, and stooped a little. His calm eyes, serious mouth, broad, furrowed forehead, and austere manner at once inspired respect. "He must be stern and inflexible," said those who saw him for the first time. But they were mistaken. If, in the exercise of his official duties, he had always had the strength to resist any temptation to swerve from the right path; if, when duty was at stake, he was as rigid as iron, in private life he was as unassuming as a child, and kind and gentle even to the verge of weakness. To this nobility of character he owed his domes-

tic happiness, that rare boon which after all is the one great treasure of life.

During the bloodiest epoch of the Reign of Terror, M. d'Escorval had saved from the guillotine a young girl, named Victorie-Laure d'Alleu, a distant cousin of the Rhetaus of Commarin, as beautiful as an angel, and only three years younger than himself. He loved her—and though she was an orphan, destitute of fortune, he married her, considering the treasure of her virgin heart of far greater value than the largest dowry. She was an honest woman as her husband was an honest man, in the strictest, most rigorous sense of the word. She was seldom seen at the Tuileries, where M. d'Escorval's worth made him eagerly welcomed. The splendors of the imperial court, outshining even the pomp of the Grand Monarque, had no attractions for her. She reserved her grace, beauty, youth, and accomplishments for the adornment of her home. Her husband was everything for her. She lived in him and through him. She had not a thought which did not belong to him; and her happiest hours were those he could spare from his arduous labors to devote to her. And when in the evening they sat beside the fire in their modest drawing-room, with their son Maurice playing on the rug at their feet, it seemed to them that they had nothing to wish for here below.

The overthrow of the Empire surprised them in the heyday of happiness. Surprised them? Scarcely. For a long time M. d'Escorval had seen the prodigious edifice, raised by the genius whom he had made his idol, totter as if about to fall. Certainly, he was troubled by this fall when at last it came, but he was truly heart-broken at beholding all the treason and cowardice which followed it. He was disgusted and horrified at the rising of the sons of mammon, eager to gorge themselves with the spoil. Under these circumstances, exile from Paris seemed an actual blessing; and he remarked to the baroness that in the seclusion of the provinces they would soon be forgotten. In his innermost heart, however, he was not without misgivings—misgivings shared by his wife, who trembled for her husband's safety, although to spare him all alarm she strove to preserve a placid countenance.

On the first Sunday in August, M. and Madame d'Escorval had been unusually sad. A vague presentiment of approaching misfortune weighed heavily upon their hearts. At the moment when Lacheneur presented himself at the parsonage they were

sitting on the terrace in front of their house, gazing anxiously at the roads leading from Escorval to the chateau, and to the village of Sairmeuse. Apprised that same morning of the duke's arrival by his friends at Montaignac, the baron had sent his son to warn M. Lacheneur. He had requested him to return as soon as possible; and yet the hours were rolling by, and Maurice had not returned.

"What if something has happened to him!" thought the anxious parents.

No, at that moment nothing had happened to him, though a word from Mademoiselle Lacheneur had sufficed to make him forget his usual deference to his father's wishes. "This evening," she had said, "I shall certainly know your heart." What could this mean? Could she doubt him? Tortured by anxieties, he could not make up his mind to go home again without having had an explanation, and he loitered near the chateau hoping that Marie-Anne would reappear.

She did reappear at last, but leaning on her father's arm. Young D'Escorval followed them at a distance, and soon saw them enter the parsonage. What they wanted there he couldn't guess, though he knew that the duke and his son were inside. The time that the Lacheneurs remained in the Abbe Midon's house seemed a century to Maurice, who paced restlessly up and down the market-place. At last, however, Marie-Anne and her father reappeared, and he was about to join them when he was prevented by the appearance of Martial, whose promises he overheard.

Maurice knew nothing of life; he was as innocent as a child, but he could not mistake the intentions that had dictated the step taken by the Marquis de Sairmeuse. At the thought that a libertine's caprice should for an instant rest on the pure and beautiful girl he loved with all the strength of his being—the girl he had sworn should be his wife—all his blood mounted madly to his brain. He felt a wild longing to chastise the marquis; but fortunately—unfortunately, perhaps—his hand was stayed by the recollection of a phrase he had heard his father repeat a thousand times: "Calmness and irony are the only weapons worthy of the strong." And at the remembrance of these words he acquired sufficient strength of will to appear calm, though in reality he was beside himself with passion.

"Ah! I will find you again," he repeated, however, through his set teeth as he watched his enemy move away. He then

turned and discovered that Marie-Anne and her father had left him. He saw them standing about a hundred yards off, and although he was surprised at their indifference, he made haste to join them, and addressed himself to M. Lacheneur.

"We are just going to your father's house," was the only reply he received, and this in an almost ferocious tone.

A glance from Marie-Anne commanded silence. He obeyed, and walked a few steps behind them, his head bowed upon his breast, terribly anxious, and vainly seeking to explain to himself what had taken place. His manner betrayed such intense grief that his mother divined a misfortune as soon as she caught sight of him.

All the anguish which this courageous woman had hidden for a month found utterance in a single cry: "Ah! here is misfortune!" said she: "we shall not escape it."

It was indeed misfortune. One could no longer doubt it on seeing M. Lacheneur enter the drawing-room. He walked with the heavy and uncertain step of a drunken man; his eyes were void of expression, his features were distorted and his lips trembled.

"What has happened?" eagerly asked the baron.

But the whilom proprietor of Sairmeuse did not seem to hear him. "Ah! I warned her," he murmured, continuing a monologue he had begun before entering the room. "Yes, I told my daughter so."

Madame d'Escorval, after kissing Marie-Anne, drew the girl toward her. "What has happened? For heaven's sake tell me what has happened!" she exclaimed.

With a gesture of resignation, the girl motioned her to look at M. Lacheneur, and listen to him.

The latter seemed to wake up; he passed his hand across his forehead and wiped away the moisture from his eyes. "It is only this, M. le Baron," said he in a harsh, unnatural voice: "I rose this morning the richest landowner in the district, and I shall lie down to-night poorer than the poorest beggar in Sairmeuse. I had everything; and now I have nothing, nothing but my two hands. They earned me my bread for twenty-five years; they will earn it for me now until the day of my death. I had a beautiful dream; it is over."

In the presence of this outburst of despair, M. d'Escorval turned pale. "You must exaggerate your misfortune," he faltered; "explain what has happened."

Unconscious of what he was doing, M. Lacheneur threw his hat upon a chair, and flinging back his long, gray hair, he said: "To you I will tell everything. I came here for that purpose. I know you; I know your heart. And have you not done me the honor to call me your friend?"

Then, without omitting a detail, he related the scene which had just taken place at the parsonage. The baron listened with intense astonishment, almost doubting the evidence of his own senses; while Madame d'Escorval's indignant exclamations showed that she was utterly revolted by such injustice.

But there was one listener, whom Marie-Anne alone observed, who was most intensely moved by Lacheneur's narrative. This listener was Maurice. Leaning against the door, pale as death, he tried in vain to repress the tears of rage and grief which rushed to his eyes. To insult Lacheneur was to insult Marie-Anne—that is to say, to injure, to outrage him in what he held dearest in the world. Had Martial now been within his reach he would certainly have paid dearly for the insults heaped on the father of the girl that Maurice loved. However, young D'Escorval swore that the chastisement he contemplated was only deferred—that it should surely come. And it was not mere angry boasting. This young man, so modest and gentle in manner, had albeit a heart that was inaccessible to fear. His beautiful, dark eyes, which usually had the trembling timidity of a girl's could meet an enemy's gaze without flinching.

When M. Lacheneur had repeated the last words he addressed to the Duc de Sairmeuse, M. d'Escorval offered him his hand. "I have told you already that I was your friend," he said, in a voice faltering with emotion; "but I must tell you to-day that I am proud of having such a friend as you."

Lacheneur trembled at the touch of the loyal hand which clasped his so warmly, and his face betrayed his inward satisfaction.

"If my father had not returned the estate," obstinately murmured Marie-Anne, "he would have been an unfaithful guardian—a thief. He has only done his duty."

M. d'Escorval turned to the young girl a little surprised. "You speak the truth, mademoiselle," he said, reproachfully; "but when you are as old as I am and have had my experience, you will know that the accomplishment of a duty is, under certain circumstances, an act of heroism of which only few persons are capable."

M. Lacheneur exclaimed warmly to his friend: "Ah! your words do me good. Now, I am glad of what I have done."

The baroness rose, too much a woman to know how to resist the generous dictates of her heart. "And I, also, Lacheneur," said she, "desire to press your hand. I wish to tell you that I esteem you as much as I despise those who have tried to humiliate you, when they should have fallen at your feet. They are heartless monsters, and I don't believe the like of them are to be found on earth."

"Alas!" sighed the baron, "the Allies have brought back plenty of others who, like the Sairmeuses, think that the world was created exclusively for their benefit."

"And yet these people wish to be our masters," growled Lacheneur.

By some strange fatality no one chanced to hear this last remark. Had it been overheard, and had the speaker been questioned, he would probably have disclosed some of the projects just forming in his mind; and then many disastrous consequences might have been averted.

M. d'Escorval had now regained his usual coolness. "Now, my dear friend," he asked, "what course do you propose to pursue with these members of the Sairmeuse family?"

"They will hear nothing more from me—for some time at least."

"What! Shall you not claim the ten thousand francs they owe you?"

"I shall ask them for nothing."

"You will be compelled to do so. Since you have alluded to the legacy, your own honor requires that you should insist upon its payment by all legal means. There are still judges in France."

M. Lacheneur shook his head. "The judges will not grant me the justice I desire. I shall not apply to them."

"But—"

"No, no. I wish to have nothing more to do with these men. I shall not even go to the chateau to remove either my own clothes or my daughter's. If they send them to us—very well. If they like to keep them so much the better. The more shameful, infamous, and odious their conduct the better I shall be satisfied."

The baron made no reply; but his wife spoke, believing that she had a sure means of conquering this incomprehensible ob-

stinacy. "I could understand your determination if you were alone in the world," said she, "but you have children."

"My son is eighteen, madame; he is in good health and has had an excellent education. He can make his own way in Paris if he chooses to remain there."

"But your daughter?"

"Marie-Anne will remain with me."

M. d'Escorval thought it his duty to interfere. "Take care, my dear friend, that your grief doesn't tamper with your reason," said he. "Reflect! What will become of you—your daughter and yourself?"

Lacheneur smiled sadly. "Oh," he replied, "we are not as destitute as I said. I exaggerated our misfortune. We are still landowners. Last year an old cousin, whom I could never induce to come and live with us at Sairmeuse, died, and left everything she had to Marie-Anne; so we've still got a poor little cottage near La Reche, with a little garden and a few acres of barren land. In compliance with my daughter's entreaties, I repaired the cottage, and furnished it with a table, some chairs, and a couple of beds. It was then intended as a home for old Father Guvat and his wife. And in the midst of my wealth and luxury, I said to myself: 'How comfortable those two old people will be there.' Well, what I thought so comfortable for others will be good enough for me now. I can raise vegetables, and Marie-Anne shall sell them."

Was he speaking seriously? Maurice must have supposed so, for he sprang forward. "This shall not be, Lacheneur!" he exclaimed.

"What!"

"No, this shall not be, for I love Marie-Anne, and I ask you to give her to me for my wife."

Maurice and Marie-Anne's affections for each other did not date from yesterday. As children they had played together in the parks of Sairmeuse and Escorval. They had shared many a butterfly hunt, and many a search for pebbles on the river banks; and oft times had they rolled in the hay while their mothers sauntered through the meadows bordering the Oiselle.

For their mothers were friends. Madame Lacheneur had been reared like most poor peasant girls; that is to say, on her marriage day she only succeeded with great difficulty in inscribing her name upon the register. But from her husband's example she learnt that prosperity, as well as noble lineage

entails numerous obligations; hence with rare courage, crowned with still rarer success, she undertook to acquire an education in keeping with her rank and fortune. And the baroness made no effort to resist the feelings of sympathy which led her toward this meritorious young woman, in whom it was easy to discern a mind of many natural gifts, and a nature which, despite low birth, was instinctively refined. When Madame Lacheneur died, Madame d'Escorval mourned for her as she would have mourned for a favorite sister.

From that moment Maurice's attachment assumed a more serious character. Educated at a college in Paris, his masters sometimes complained of his want of application. "If your professors are not satisfied with you," said his mother, "you shall not go to Escorval for the holidays, and then you will not see your friend." Now this simple threat always sufficed to make the schoolboy resume his studies with redoubled diligence. So each succeeding year strengthened as it were the love which preserved Maurice from the restlessness and errors of youth.

The two children were equally timid and artless, and equally infatuated with each other. Long walks in the twilight under their parents' eyes, a glance that revealed their delight at meeting, flowers exchanged between them and religiously preserved —such were their simple pleasures. That magical word love—so sweet to utter, and so sweet to hear—had never once dropped from their lips. Maurice's audacity had never gone beyond a furtive pressure of the hand.

The parents could not be ignorant of this mutual affection; and if they pretended to shut their eyes, it was only because it neither displeased them nor disturbed their plans. M. and Madame d'Escorval saw no objection to their son's marriage with a girl whose nobility of character they appreciated, and who was as beautiful as she was good. That she was the richest heiress in the province was naturally no objection. So far as M. Lacheneur was concerned, he was delighted at the prospect of a marriage which would ally him, a former plow-boy, with an old and generally respected family. Hence, although the subject had never been directly alluded to either by the baron or Lacheneur, there was withal a tacit agreement between the two families. Indeed, the marriage was considered as a foregone conclusion.

And yet Maurice's impetuous, unexpected declaration struck every one dumb. In spite of his agitation, the young man per-

ceived the effect his words had produced, and frightened by his own boldness, he turned toward his father with a look of interrogation. The baron's face was grave, even sad; but his attitude expressed no displeasure.

This gave renewed courage to the anxious lover. "You will excuse me," he said, addressing Lacheneur, "for presenting my request in such a manner, and at such a time. But surely it is at the moment when misfortune overtakes one that true friends should declare themselves, and deem themselves fortunate if their devotion can obliterate the remembrance of such infamous treatment as that to which you have been subjected."

As he spoke, he was watching Marie-Anne. Blushing and embarrassed, she turned away her head, perhaps to conceal the tears which gushed forth from her eyes—tears of joy and gratitude. The love of the man she worshiped had come forth victorious from a test which many heiresses might in vain resort to. Now could she truly say that she knew Maurice's heart.

Maurice speedily continued: "I have not consulted my father, sir; but I know his affection for me and his esteem for you. When the happiness of my life is at stake he will not oppose me. He, who married my dear mother without a dowry, must understand my feelings."

With these words Maurice paused, awaiting the verdict.

"I approve your course, my son," said M. d'Escorval, "you have behaved like an honorable man. Certainly you are very young to become the head of a family; but, as you say, circumstances demand it."

Then, turning to M. Lacheneur, he added: "My dear friend, on my son's behalf I ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Maurice had not expected so little opposition. In his delight he was almost tempted to bless the hateful Duc de Sairmeuse, to whom he would owe his future happiness. He sprang toward his father, and seizing his hands, he raised them to his lips, faltering: "Thanks!—you are so good! I love you so! Oh, how happy I am!"

Unfortunately, the poor boy's joy was premature. A gleam of pride flashed in M. Lacheneur's eyes; but his face soon resumed its gloomy expression. "Believe me, M. le Baron," said he, "I am deeply touched by what you and your son have said—yes, deeply touched. You wish to make me forget my

humiliation; but for this very reason, I should be the most contemptible of men if I did not refuse the great honor you desire to confer upon my daughter."

"What!" exclaimed the baron in utter astonishment; "you refuse?"

"I am compelled to do so."

Although momentarily thunderstruck, Maurice soon renewed the attack with an energy no one had ever suspected in his character. "Do you wish to ruin my life, to ruin *our* lives," he exclaimed; "for if I love Marie-Anne she also loves me."

It was easy to see that he spoke the truth. The unhappy girl, crimson with happy blushes a moment earlier, had now turned as white as marble and glanced imploringly toward her father.

"It can not be," repeated M. Lacheneur; "and the day will arrive when you will bless the decision I have come to."

Alarmed by her son's evident dismay, Madame d'Escorval interposed: "You must have reasons for this refusal," said she.

"None that I can disclose, madame. But as long as I can prevent it, my daughter shall never be your son's wife."

"Ah! it will kill my child!" exclaimed the baroness.

M. Lacheneur shook his head. "M. Maurice," said he, "is young; he will soon console himself—and forget."

"Never!" interrupted the unhappy lover—"never!"

"And your daughter?" inquired the baroness.

Ah! this was the weak spot in Lacheneur's armor: a mother's instinct had prompted the baroness's last words. The whilom lord of Sairmeuse hesitated for a moment, and it was not without a struggle that his will gained the mastery over his heart: "Marie-Anne," he replied slowly, "knows her duty too well not to obey me. When I have told her the motive that governs my conduct she will resign herself, and if she suffers she will know how to conceal her sufferings."

He suddenly paused. In the distance a report of musketry could be plainly heard. Each face grew paler: for circumstances imparted to these sounds an ominous significance to anxious hearts. Both M. d'Escorval and Lacheneur sprang out upon the terrace. But everything was silent again. Far as the horizon stretched, nothing unusual could be discerned. The limpidity of the azure sky was unimpaired, and not the faintest cloudlet of smoke rose above the trees.

"It is the enemy," muttered M. Lacheneur in a tone which told how gladly he would have shouldered his gun and with five hundred others marched against the allies.

He paused. The reports were repeated with still greater violence, and for five minutes or so succeeded each other without cessation. It seemed even as if some pieces of artillery had been discharged.

M. d'Escorval listened with knitted brows. "This is very strange; but yet it is scarcely the fire of a regular engagement," he murmured.

To remain any longer in such a state of uncertainty was out of the question. "If you will allow me, father," ventured Maurice, "I will try and ascertain—"

"Go," replied the baron quietly; "but if there should be anything, which I doubt, don't expose yourself to useless danger, but return."

"Oh! be prudent!" nervously insisted Madame d'Escorval, who already saw her son exposed to peril.

"Be prudent!" also entreated Marie-Anne, who alone understood the attraction that danger might have for a lover in despair.

These cautions were unnecessary. As Maurice was rushing to the gate, his father stopped him.

"Wait," said he, "here comes some one who may, perhaps, be able to enlighten us."

A peasant was passing along the road leading from Sairmeuse. He was walking bareheaded and with hurried strides in the middle of the dusty highway, brandishing his stick as if soon to threaten some invisible enemy, and he came near enough for the party on the terrace to distinguish his features.

"Ah! it's Chanlouineau!" exclaimed M. Lacheneur.

"The owner of the vineyards on the Borderie?"

"The same! The best-looking young farmer in the district, and the best in heart as well. Ah! he has good blood in his veins; we may well be proud of him."

"Ask him to stop," said M. d'Escorval.

"Ah! Chanlouineau!" shouted Lacheneur, leaning over the balustrade.

The young farmer raised his head.

"Come up here," resumed Lacheneur; "the baron wishes to speak with you."

Chanlouineau replied by a gesture of assent, and opening the garden gate soon crossed the lawn. He had a furious look in his face, and the state of his clothes showed plainly enough that he had been fighting. He had lost his collar and necktie, and the muscles of his neck were swollen as if by the pressure of some vigorous hand.

"What's going on?" eagerly asked Lacheneur. "Is there a battle?"

"Oh, there's no battle," replied the young farmer, with a nervous laugh. "The firing you heard is in honor of the Duc de Sairmeuse."

"What!"

"Oh, it's the truth. It's all the work of that scoundrel, Chupin. If ever he comes within reach of my arm again, he will never steal any more."

M. Lacheneur was confounded. "Tell us what has happened," he said, excitedly.

"Oh, it's simple enough. When the duke arrived at Sairmeuse, Chupin, with his two rascally boys, and that old hag, his wife, ran after the carriage like beggars after a diligence, crying, 'Vive Monseigneur le duc!' The duke was delighted, for he no doubt expected a volley of stones, so he gave each of the wretches a five-franc piece. This money abetted Chupin's appetite, so he took it into his head to give the duke such a reception as was given the emperor. Having learned from Bibaine, whose tongue is as long as a viper's, everything that had occurred at the parsonage between the duke and you, M. Lacheneur, he came and proclaimed the news on the market-place. When the fools heard it, all those who had purchased national lands got frightened. Chupin had counted on this, and soon he began telling the poor fools that they must burn powder under the duke's nose if they wished him to confirm their titles to their property."

"And did they believe him?"

"Implicitly. It didn't take them long to make their preparations. They went to the *mairie* and took the firemen's muskets and the guns used for firing salutes on fête days; the mayor gave them powder, and then you heard the result. When I left Sairmeuse there was more than two hundred idiots in front of the parsonage shouting 'Vive Monseigneur! Vive le Duc de Sairmeuse!' at the top of their voices."

"The same pitiful farce that was played in Paris, only on a

smaller scale," murmured the Baron d'Escorval. "Avarice and human cowardice are the same all the world over."

Meanwhile, Chanlouineau was proceeding with his narrative. "To make the fete complete, the devil must have warned all the nobility of the district, for they all hastened to the spot. They say that M. de Sairmeuse is the king's favorite, and that he can do just as he pleases. So you may imagine how they all greeted him! I'm only a poor peasant, but I'd never lie down in the dust before any man like these old nobles, who are so haughty with us, did before the duke. They even kissed his hands, and he allowed them to do so. He walked about the square with the Marquis de Courtornieu—"

"And his son?" interrupted Maurice.

"The Marquis Martial, eh? Oh, he was also strutting about with Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu on his arm. Ah! I can't understand how people can call her pretty—a little bit of a thing, so blond that one might almost take her hair for white. Ah, they did laugh, those two, and poke fun at the peasants into the bargain. Some of the villagers say they are going to be married. And even this evening there's to be a banquet at the Chateau de Courtornieu in the duke's honor."

"You've only forgotten one thing," said M. Lacheneur when Chanlouineau paused. "How is it your clothes are torn; it seems as if you'd been fighting."

The young farmer hesitated for a moment, and it was with evident reluctance that he replied: "I can tell you all the same. While Chupin was preaching, I preached as well, but not in the same strain. The scoundrel reported me. So, in crossing the square, the duke stopped before me and remarked: 'So you are an evil-disposed person?' I said I wasn't, though I knew my rights. Then he took me by the coat and shook me, and told me he'd cure me and take possession of *his* vineyard again. The deuce! When I felt the old rascal's hand on me my blood boiled. I pinioned him. But six or seven men fell on me, and compelled me to let him go. But he had better make up his mind not to come prowling about my vineyard!"

The young farmer clenched his hands, and his eyes flashed ominously; he evidently had an intense thirst for vengeance. M. d'Escorval remained silent, fearing to aggravate this hatred, so imprudently kindled, and the explosion of which might have terrible results.

M. Lacheneur had risen from his chair. "I must go and take

possession of my cottage," he remarked to Chanlouineau; "will you accompany me? I have a proposal to make to you."

M. and Madame d'Escorval endeavored to detain him, but he would not allow himself to be persuaded, and a minute later he, his daughter, and Chanlouineau had taken their departure. However, Maurice did not despair, for Marie-Anne had promised to meet him on the following day in the pine grove near La Reche.

Chanlouineau had correctly reported the reception which the villagers of Sairmeuse had given to the duke. The artful Chupin had found a sure means of kindling a semblance of enthusiasm among the callous, calculating peasants who were his neighbors.

He was a dangerous fellow, this old poacher and farmyard thief. Shrewd he always was; cautious and pathetic when necessary; bold as those who possess nothing can afford to be; in short, one of the most consummate scoundrels that ever breathed. The peasants feared him, and yet they had no conception of his real character. All the resources of his mind had hitherto been expended in evading the provisions of the rural code. To save himself from falling into the hands of the gendarmes, to steal a few sacks of wheat without detection, he had expended talents of intrigue which would have sufficed to make the fortune of twenty diplomats. Circumstances, as he always said, had been against him. Hence, he desperately caught at the first and only opportunity worthy of his genius that had ever presented itself.

Of course, the wily rustic told his fellow villagers nothing of the true circumstances which had attended the restoration of Sairmeuse to its former owner. From him the peasants only learned the bare fact; and the news spread rapidly from group to group. "M. Lacheneur has given up Sairmeuse," said Chupin. "Chateau, forests, vineyards, fields—he surrenders everything."

This was enough, and more than enough, to terrify every landowner in the village. If Lacheneur, this man who was so powerful in their eyes, considered the danger so threatening that he deemed it necessary or advisable to make a complete surrender, what was to become of them—poor devils—without aid, without counsel, without defense? They were told that the government was about to betray their interests; that a decree was in process of preparation which would render their

title-deeds worthless. They could see no hope of salvation, except through the duke's generosity—that generosity which Chupin painted with the glowing colors of a rainbow.

When a man is not strong enough to weather the gale, he must bow like the reed before it, and rise again after the storm has passed: to this conclusion the frightened peasantry came. Accordingly they bowed. And their apparent enthusiasm was all the more vociferous, on account of the rage and fear that filled their hearts. A close observer would have detected an undercurrent of anger and menace in their shouts; and in point of fact each villager murmured to himself: "What do we risk by crying, 'Vive le duc?' Nothing, absolutely nothing. If he's satisfied with that as a compensation for his lost property—all well and good! If he isn't satisfied, we shall have time by and by to adopt other measures." Hence they all shouted themselves hoarse.

And while the duke was sipping his coffee in the cure's little sitting-room, he expressed his lively satisfaction at the scene outside. He, this great lord of times gone by, this unconquerable, incorrigible man of absurd prejudices and obstinate illusions, accepting these acclamations as if they had been bona fide. Without the least semblance of doubt, he blandly mistook the counterfeit coin for genuine money. "How you have deceived me, to be sure," he said to the Abbe Midon. "How could you declare that your people were unfavorably disposed toward us?"

The Abbe Midon was silent. What could he reply? He could not understand this sudden revolution in public opinion—this abrupt change from gloom and discontent to excessive gaiety. Something must have transpired of which he was not aware. Somebody must have been at work among the peasantry.

It was not long before it became apparent who that somebody was. Emboldened by his success outside, Chupin ventured to present himself at the parsonage. He entered the sitting-room, scraping and cringing, his back bent double, and an obsequious smile upon his lips. He came as an ambassador, he declared, with numerous protestations of respect; he came to implore "monseigneur" to show himself upon the market-place.

"Ah, well—yes," exclaimed the duke, rising from his seat; "yes, I will yield to the wishes of these good people. Follow me, marquis!"

As the duke appeared on the threshold of the parsonage, a loud shout rent the air; a score of muskets blazed away, and

the old salute guns belched forth smoke and fire. Never had Sairmeuse heard such a salvo of artillery, and the shock of the report shattered three windows at the inn of the Bœuf Couronne.

The Duc de Sairmeuse knew how to preserve an appearance of haughty indifference. Any display of emotion was, in his opinion, vulgar; but in reality he was perfectly delighted, so delighted that he desired to reward his welcomers. A glance over the deeds handed him by Lacheneur had shown him that Sairmeuse had been restored to him virtually intact. The portions of the immense domain which had been detached and sold separately were, after all, of little importance. Now, the duke, already schooled in a measure by his son, thought it would be politic, and at the same time inexpensive, to abandon all claim to these few acres, now shared by forty or fifty peasants.

"My friends," he exclaimed in a loud voice, "I renounce, for myself and for my descendants, all claim to the lands belonging to my house which you have purchased. They are yours—I give them to you!"

By this absurd semblance of a gift, M. de Sairmeuse thought to add the finishing touch to his popularity. A great mistake! It simply assured the popularity of Chupin, the organizer of the farce. While the duke was promenading through the crowd with a proud and self-satisfied air, the peasants, despite their seemingly respectful attitude, were secretly laughing and jeering at him. And if they promptly took his part against Chanlouineau, it was only because his gift was still fresh in their minds; except for that his grace might have fared badly indeed.

The duke, however, had but little time to think of this encounter, which produced a vivid impression on his son. One of his former companions in exile, the Marquis de Courtornieu, whom he had informed of his arrival, now appeared on the place, and hastened to welcome him. The marquis was accompanied by his daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche. Martial could not do otherwise than offer his arm to the daughter of his father's friend; and the young couple took a leisurely promenade under the shade of the lofty trees, while the duke renewed his acquaintance with all the nobility of the neighborhood.

There was not a single nobleman who did not hasten to press the Duc de Sairmeuse's hand. First, he possessed, it was said, an estate in England valued at more than twenty millions of francs. Then, he was the king's favorite, and each member of

the local aristocracy had some favor to ask for himself, his relatives, or friends. Poor king! If he had had twenty kingdoms of France to divide like a cake between all these cormorants, he would yet have failed to satisfy their voracious appetites.

That evening, after a grand banquet at the Chateau de Courtornieu, the duke slept at the Chateau de Sairmeuse, in the room which had been so lately occupied by Lacheneur. He was gay, chatty, and full of confidence in the future.

"I'm like Louis XVIII in Bonaparte's bedroom," he said to his son in a jocular tone; then adding with a shade of sentiment, "Ah! it's good to be in one's own house again!"

But Martial only tendered a mechanical reply. His mind was occupied in thinking of two women, who had made a deep impression on his heart that day. He was thinking of two girls so utterly unlike—Blanche de Courtornieu and Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

V

ONLY those who, in the bright springtime of life, have loved, and been loved in return, who have suddenly seen an impassable gulf open between them and their future happiness, can realize Maurice d'Escorval's disappointment. All the dreams of his life, all his future plans, were based upon his love for Marie-Anne. If this love failed him, the enchanted castle which hope had erected would crumble and fall, burying him beneath its ruins. Without Marie-Anne he saw neither aim nor motive in existence. Still he did not suffer himself to be deluded by false hopes. Although at first his appointed meeting with Marie-Anne on the following day seemed salvation itself, on reflection he was forced to admit that this interview could bring no change, since everything depended upon the will of a third person, M. Lacheneur.

Maurice spent the remainder of Sunday in mournful silence. Dinner-time came; and he took his seat at the table, but it was impossible for him to eat, and he soon requested his parents'

permission to withdraw. M. d'Escorval and the baroness exchanged sorrowful glances, but did not offer any comment. They respected his grief, knowing that a sorrow such as his would only be aggravated by any attempt at consolation.

"Poor Maurice!" murmured Madame d'Escorval, as soon as her son had left the room. "Perhaps it will not be prudent for us to leave him entirely to the dictates of despair."

The baron shuddered. He divined only too well his wife's sad apprehensions. "We have nothing to fear," he replied quickly; "I heard Marie-Anne promise to meet Maurice tomorrow in the grove near La Reche."

The baroness, who in her anxiety had momentarily dreaded lest Maurice might commit suicide, now breathed more freely. Still she was a mother, and her husband's assurance did not completely satisfy her. She hastily went upstairs, softly opened the door of her son's room and looked in.

He was so engrossed in gloomy thought that he neither heard her nor even for an instant suspected the presence of the anxious mother who was fondly watching over him. He was sitting at the window, his elbows resting on the sill and his head between his hands. There was no moon, but the night was clear, and over and beyond the light fog, which indicated the course of the Oiselle, rose the towers and turrets of the massive Chateau de Sairmeuse. More than once had Maurice sat silently gazing at this stately pile, which sheltered all that he held dearest and most precious in the world. From his windows Marie-Anne's casement could be perceived, and the throbbing of his heart would quicken whenever he saw it lighted up. "She is there," he would think, "in her virgin chamber. She is praying on her bended knees, and she murmurs my name after her father's, imploring Heaven's blessing upon us both."

But this evening Maurice was not waiting for a light to gleam through the panes of that dear window. Marie-Anne was no longer at Sairmeuse—she had been driven away. Where was she now? She, accustomed to all the luxury that wealth could procure, no longer had any home save a poor thatch-roofed hovel, the walls of which were not even whitewashed, and whose only floor was the earth itself, dusty as the public highway in summer, and frozen or muddy in winter. She was reduced to the necessity of occupying herself the humble abode which, in her charitable heart, she had intended as an asylum for one of her pensioners. What was she doing now? Doubt-

less she was weeping; and at this thought poor Maurice felt heartbroken.

What was his surprise, a little after midnight, to see the chateau brilliantly illuminated. The duke and his son had repaired there after the banquet given by the Marquis de Courtornieu; and before going to bed they made a tour of inspection through their ancestral abode. M. de Sairmeuse had not crossed its threshold for two-and-twenty years, and Martial had never seen it in his life. Maurice could see the lights leap from story to story, from casement to casement, until at last even Marie-Anne's windows were illuminated.

At this sight the unhappy youth could not restrain a cry of rage. These men, these strangers, dared to enter this virgin bower which he, even in thought, scarcely ventured to picture. No doubt they trampled carelessly over the delicate carpet with their heavy boots, and Maurice trembled to think of the liberties which, in their insolent familiarity, they might perhaps venture to take. He fancied he could see them examining and handling the thousand petty trifles with which young girls love to surround themselves, impudently opening the drawers and perhaps inquisitively reading an unfinished letter lying on the writing-desk. Never until this night had Maurice supposed it possible to hate any one as now he hated these two men.

At last, in despair, he threw himself on to his bed, and passed the remainder of the night in thinking over what he should say to Marie-Anne on the morrow, and in seeking for some means to remove the difficulties obstructing his path to happiness. He rose at daybreak and spent the early morning wandering about the park, fearing and yet longing for the hour that would decide his fate. Madame d'Escorval was obliged to exert all her authority to make him take some food, for he had quite forgotten that he had spent twenty-four hours without eating. At last, when eleven o'clock struck, he left the house.

The lands of La Reche are situated across the Oiselle, and Maurice, to reach his destination, had to take a ferry a short distance from his home. As he approached the river-bank, he perceived six or seven peasants who were waiting to cross. They were talking in a loud voice, and did not notice young d'Escorval as he drew near them.

"It is certainly true," Maurice heard one of the men say. "I heard it from Chanlouineau himself only last evening. He was wild with delight. 'I invite you all to the wedding!' he

cried. 'I am betrothed to M. Lacheneur's daughter; the affair's decided.' "

Maurice was well-nigh stunned by this astounding news, and he was actually unable to think or to move.

"Besides," he heard the same man say, "Chanlouineau's been in love with her for a long time. Every one knows that. Haven't you ever noticed his eyes when he met her—red-hot coals were nothing to them. But while her father was so rich, he didn't dare speak. However, now that the old man has met with this trouble, he has ventured to offer himself, and is accepted."

"An unfortunate thing for him," remarked one of the listeners.

"Why so?"

"If M. Lacheneur is ruined as they say—"

The others laughed heartily. "Ruined—M. Lacheneur!" they exclaimed in chorus. "How absurd! He's richer than all of us put together. Do you suppose he's been stupid enough not to put anything by during all these years? He hasn't put his money in ground, as he pretends, but somewhere else."

"What you are saying is untrue!" interrupted Maurice, indignantly. "M. Lacheneur left Sairmeuse as poor as he entered it."

On recognizing M. d'Escorval's son, the peasants became extremely cautious; and to all his questions they would only give vague, unsatisfactory answers. A Sairmeuse rustic is usually so dreadfully afraid of compromising himself that he will never give a frank reply to a question if he has the slightest reason to suspect that his answer might displease his questioner. However, what Maurice had heard before sufficed to fill his heart with doubt. Directly he had crossed the Oiselle, he pushed on rapidly toward La Reche, murmuring as he went: "What! Marie-Anne marry Chanlouineau? No; that can not be. It is impossible!"

The spot termed La Reche—literally the Waste—where Marie-Anne had promised to meet Maurice, owed its name to the rebellious sterile nature of its soil. It seems to have been cursed by nature. Boulders strewed the sandy surface, and vain indeed had been all the attempts at culture. It is only here and there among the broom that a few stunted oaks with straggling branches manage to exist. But at the edge of this barren tract rises a shady grove. Here the firs are straight and strong, with wild clematis and honeysuckle clinging to their stems and branches, for the winter floods have washed down from the

high lands and left among the rocks sufficient soil to sustain them.

On reaching this grove, Maurice consulted his watch. It was just noon; he had feared he was late, but he was fully an hour in advance of the appointed time. He seated himself on a ledge of one of the high rocks scattered among the firs, whence he could survey the entire Reche, and waited.

The weather was sultry in the extreme. The rays of the scorching August sun fell on the sandy soil, and speedily withered the few weeds which had sprung up since the last rainfall. The stillness was profound. Not a sound broke the silence, not even the chirp of a bird, the buzzing of an insect, nor the faintest whisper of a breeze passing through the firs. All nature was apparently asleep—taking its siesta—and there was nothing to remind one of life, motion, or mankind. This repose of nature, which contrasted so vividly with the tumult raging in his own heart, soon exerted a beneficial effect on Maurice. These few moments of solitude afforded him an opportunity to regain his composure, and to collect his thoughts, scattered by the storm of passion, as leaves are scattered by the fierce November gale.

With sorrow comes experience, and that cruel knowledge of life which teaches one to guard one's self against one's hopes. It was not until he heard the conversation of the peasants standing near the ferry that Maurice fully realized the horror of Lacheneur's position. Suddenly precipitated from the social eminence he had attained, the whilom lord of Sairmeuse found, in the valley of humiliation into which he was cast, only hatred, distrust, and scorn. Both factions despised and derided him. Traitor, cried one; thief, cried the other. He no longer held any social status. He was the fallen man, the man who *had* been, and who was no more. Was not the excessive misery of such a position a sufficient explanation of the strangest and wildest resolutions?

This thought made Maurice tremble. Connecting the conversation of the peasants with the words spoken by Lacheneur to Chanlouineau on the preceding evening at Escorval, he came to the conclusion that this report of Marie-Anne's marriage to the young farmer was not so improbable as he had at first supposed. But why should M. Lacheneur give his daughter to an uncultured peasant? From mercenary motives? Certainly not, since he had just refused an alliance of which he

had been justly proud even in his days of prosperity. Could it be in order to satisfy his wounded pride then? Perhaps so; possibly he did not wish it to be said that he owed anything to a son-in-law.

Maurice was exhausting all his ingenuity and penetration in endeavoring to solve this knotty point, when at last, along the footpath crossing the waste, he perceived a figure approaching him. It was Marie-Anne. He rose to his feet, but fearing observation did not venture to leave the shelter of the grove. Marie-Anne must have felt a similar fear, for as she hurried on she cast anxious glances on every side. Maurice remarked, not without surprise, that she was bareheaded, and had neither shawl nor scarf about her shoulders.

As she reached the edge of the wood, he sprang toward her, and catching hold of her hand raised it to his lips. But this hand which she had so often yielded to him was now gently withdrawn, and with so sad a gesture that he could not help feeling there was no hope.

"I came, Maurice," she began, "because I could not endure the thought of your anxiety. By doing so I have betrayed my father's confidence. He was obliged to leave home, and I hastened here; and yet I promised him, only two hours ago, that I would never see you again. You hear me—never!"

She spoke hurriedly, but Maurice was appalled by the firmness of her accent. Had he been less agitated, he would have seen what a terrible effort this semblance of calm cost the girl he loved. He would have detected the agony she was striving to conceal in the pallor of her cheeks, the twitching of her lips, and the redness of her eyelids, which, although recently bathed with fresh water, still betrayed the tears she had wept during the night.

"If I have come," she continued, "it is only to tell you that, for your own sake, as well as for mine, you must not retain the slightest shadow of hope. It is all over; we must separate forever! It is only weak natures that revolt against a destiny which can not be altered. Let us accept our fate uncomplainingly. I wished to see you once more, and to bid you be of good courage. Go away, Maurice—leave Escorval—forget me!"

"Forget you, Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the poor fellow, "forget you!" His eyes met hers, and in a husky voice he added: "Will you then forget me?"

"I am a woman, Maurice—"

But he interrupted her. "Ah! I did not expect this," he said,

despondingly. "Poor fool that I was! I believed you would surely find a way to touch your father's heart."

She blushed slightly, and with evident hesitation replied: "I threw myself at my father's feet, but he repulsed me."

Maurice was thunderstruck, but recovering himself: "It was because you did not know how to speak to him!" he exclaimed with passionate emphasis; "but I shall know how I will present such arguments that he will be forced to yield. Besides, what right has he to ruin my happiness with his caprices? I love you, you love me, and by the right of love, you are mine—mine rather than his! I will make him understand this, you shall see. Where is he? Where can I find him?"

Already he was starting to go, he knew not where, when Marie-Anne caught him by the arm. "Remain here," she answered in a tone of authority surprising in one of her sex and youth, "remain! Ah, you have failed to understand me, Maurice. But you must know the truth. I am acquainted now with the reasons of my father's refusal; and though his decision should cost me my life, I approve it. Don't try to find my father. If he were moved by your prayers, and gave his consent, I should have the courage to refuse mine!"

Maurice was so beside himself that this reply did not enlighten him. Crazed with anger and despair, regardless even of how he spoke to the woman he loved so deeply, he exclaimed: "Is it for Chanlouineau, then, that you are reserving your consent? I've already heard that he goes about everywhere saying you will soon be his wife."

Marie-Anne could not conceal all resentment of these words; and yet there was more sorrow than anger in the glance she cast on Maurice. "Must I stoop so low as to defend myself from such an imputation?" she asked sadly. "Must I tell you that even if I suspect such an arrangement between my father and Chanlouineau, I have not been consulted? Must I tell you that there are some sacrifices which are beyond the strength of human nature? Understand this: I have found strength to renounce the man I love—I shall never be able to accept another in his place!"

Maurice hung his head, abashed by her earnest words, and dazzled by the sublime expression of her face. Reason returned to him; he realized the enormity of his suspicions, and was horrified with himself for having dared to give them utterance. "Oh! forgive me!" he faltered, "forgive me!"

What did the mysterious motive of all these events which had so rapidly succeeded each other, what did M. Lacheneur's secrets or Marie-Anne's reticence matter to him now? He was seeking some chance of salvation, and believed that he had found it. "We must fly!" he exclaimed; "fly at once without pausing to look back. Before night we shall have crossed the frontier." So saying, he sprang toward her with outstretched arms as if to seize her and carry her off.

But she checked him by a single look. "Fly!" said she reproachfully; "fly!—and is it you, Maurice, who thus advises me? What! while my poor father is crushed with misfortune, am I to add despair and shame to his sorrows? His friends have deserted him; must I, his daughter, also abandon him? Ah! if I did that, I should be a vile, cowardly creature! If, when I believed my father to be the true owner of Sairmeuse, he had asked of me such a sacrifice as that I consented to last night, I might, perhaps, have resolved on doing what you say. I might have left Sairmeuse in broad daylight on my lover's arm, for it isn't the world I fear! But if one might fly from the chateau of a wealthy, happy father, one *can not* desert a despairing, penniless parent. Leave me, Maurice, where honor holds me. It will not be difficult for me, the daughter of generations of peasants, to become a peasant myself. Leave me! I can not endure any more! Go! and remember that it is impossible to be utterly wretched if one's conscience is clean and one's duty fulfilled!"

Maurice was about to reply, when a crackling of dry branches made him turn his head. Scarcely ten paces off, Martial de Sairmeuse was standing under the firs leaning on his gun.

VI

THE Duc de Sairmeuse had indulged in but little sleep on the night of his return, or, as he phrased it, "of his restoration." Although he pretended to be inaccessible to the emotions which agitate the common herd, the scenes of the day had in point of fact greatly excited him; and, on lying down to rest,

he could not help reviewing them, although he made it a rule of life never to reflect. While exposed to the scrutiny of the village peasants and of his own aristocratic acquaintances, he had felt that honor required him to appear cold and indifferent to everything that transpired, but as soon as he was alone in the privacy of his own bedroom, he gave free vent to his satisfaction.

This satisfaction amounted to perfect joy, almost verging on delirium. He was now forced to admit to himself Lacheneur had rendered him an immense service in voluntarily restoring Sairmeuse. This man to whom he had displayed the blackest ingratitude, this man, honest to heroism, whom he had treated like an unfaithful servant, had just relieved him of an anxiety which had long poisoned his life. Indeed, Lacheneur had just placed the Duc de Sairmeuse beyond the reach of a very possible calamity which he had dreaded for some time back.

If his secret anxiety had been made known, it would have caused some little merriment. The less fortunate of the returning *emigres* were in the habit of remarking that the Sairmeuses would never know want, as they possessed property in England of a value of many million francs. Broadly speaking, the statement was true, only the property in question—property coming from Martial's mother and maternal grandfather—had not been left to the duke, but to Martial himself. It is true that the Duc de Sairmeuse enjoyed absolute control over this enormous fortune; he disposed of the capital and the immense revenues just as he pleased, although in reality everything belonged to his son—to his only son. The duke himself possessed nothing—a pitiful income of twelve hundred francs, or so, strictly speaking, not even the means of subsistence.

Martial, who was just coming of age, had certainly never uttered a word which might lead his father to suppose that he had any intention of removing the property from his control; still this word might some day or another be spoken, and at the thought of such a contingency the duke shuddered with horror. He saw himself reduced to a pension, a very handsome pension undoubtedly, but still a fixed, immutable, regular allowance, by which he would be obliged to regulate his expenditure. He would have to calculate that two ends might meet—he, who had been accustomed to inexhaustible coffers. "And this will necessarily happen sooner or later," he thought.

"If Martial should marry, if he should become ambitious, or meet with evil counselors, then my reign will end."

Hence, the duke watched and studied his son much as a jealous woman studies and watches the lover she mistrusts. He thought he could read in his son's eyes many thoughts which Martial never had; he carefully noted whether the Marquis was gay or sad, careless or preoccupied, and according to the young man's mood, he became reassured or grew still more alarmed. Sometimes he imagined the worst. "If I should quarrel by and by with Martial," he thought, "he would take possession of his entire fortune, and I should be left absolutely without bread."

To a man like the Duc de Sairmeuse, who judged the sentiments of others by his own, these torturing apprehensions proved a terrible chastisement; and there were days when his personal poverty and impotence well-nigh drove him mad. "What am I?" he would say to himself in a fit of rage. "A mere plaything in the hands of a child. My son owns me. If I displease him, he will cast me aside. Yes, he will be able to dismiss *me* just as he would a lackey. If I enjoy his fortune, it will be because he allows me to do so. I owe my very existence, as well as my luxuries, to his charity. But a moment's anger, even a whim, may deprive me of everything."

With such ideas in his brain, the duke could not love his son. Indeed, he hated him. He passionately envied him all the advantages he possessed—his youth, his millions, his physical good looks, and his talents, which were really of a superior order. We every day meet mothers who are jealous of their daughters, and in the same way there are fathers who are jealous of their sons. This was one of those cases. The duke, however, showed no outward sign of mental disquietude; and if Martial had possessed less penetration, he might have believed that his father adored him. However, if he *had* detected the duke's secret, he did not reveal his knowledge, nor did he abuse his power. Their manner toward each other was perfect. The duke was kind even to weakness; Martial full of deference. But their relations were not those of father and son. One was in constant fear of displeasing the other; the other a little too sure of his power. They lived on a footing of perfect equality, like two companions of the same age. From this trying situation, Lacheneur had now rescued the duke. On becoming once more the owner of Sairmeuse, an estate worth more than three

million francs, his grace freed himself from his son's tyranny; and recovered all his liberty. What brilliant projects flitted through his brain that night! He beheld himself the richest landowner in the province; and in addition he was the king's chosen friend. To what then might he not aspire? Such a prospect enchanted him. He felt quite young again: he had shaken off the twenty years he had spent in exile. So, rising before nine o'clock, he went to Martial's room to rouse him.

On returning from dining with the Marquis de Courtornieu, the evening before, the duke had promenaded through the chateau; but this hasty inspection by candle-light had not satisfied his curiosity. He wished to visit everything in detail now that it was day. So, followed by his son, he explored one after another the numerous rooms of this princely abode; and at every step he took, the recollections of childhood crowded upon him. Lacheneur had such a wonderful respect for all the appointments of the chateau that the duke found things as old as himself religiously preserved, and occupying the old familiar places from which they had never been removed.

"Decidedly, Marquis," he exclaimed when his inspection was concluded, "this Lacheneur wasn't such a rascal as I supposed. I am disposed to forgive him a great deal, on account of the care he has taken of our house in our absence."

Martial seemed engrossed in thought. "I think, sir," he said, at last, "that we should show our gratitude to this man by paying him a large indemnity."

This last word excited the duke's anger. "An indemnity!" he exclaimed. "Are you mad, Marquis? Think of the income he has received out of my estate. Have you forgotten the calculation made for us last evening by the Chevalier de la Livandiere?"

"The chevalier is a fool!" declared Martial, promptly. "He forgot that Lacheneur has trebled the value of Sairmeuse. I think our family honor requires us to give this man an indemnity of at least a hundred thousand francs. This would, moreover, be a good stroke of policy in the present state of public sentiment, and his majesty would, I am sure, be much pleased if we did so."

"Stroke of policy"—"public sentiment"—"his majesty." You might have obtained almost anything from M. de Sairmeuse by such words and arguments as these.

"Heavenly powers!" he exclaimed; "a hundred thousand

francs! how you talk! It is all very well for you, with your fortune! Still, if you really think so—"

"Ah! my dear sir, isn't my fortune yours? Yes, such is really my opinion. So much so, indeed, that, if you will permit it, I will see Lacheneur myself, and arrange the matter in such a way that his pride won't be wounded. It would be worth our while to retain such devotion as his."

The duke opened his eyes to their widest extent. "Lacheneur's pride!" he murmured. "Worth while to retain his devotion! Why do you talk in that strain? What's the reason of this extraordinary interest?"

He paused, enlightened by a sudden recollection. "Ah, I understand!" he exclaimed; "I understand. He has a pretty daughter." Martial smiled without replying.

"Yes, as pretty as a rose," continued the duke; "but a hundred thousand francs; zounds! That's a round sum to pay for such a whim. But, if you insist upon it—"

After this the matter was settled, and, two hours later, armed with the authorization he had solicited, Martial started on his mission. The first peasant he met told him the way to the cottage which M. Lacheneur now occupied. "Follow the river," said the man, "and when you see a pine grove on your left, cross through it and follow the path over the waste."

Martial was crossing through the grove when he heard the sound of voices. He approached, recognized Marie-Anne and Maurice d'Escorval, and, obeying an angry impulse, paused.

During the decisive moments of life, when one's entire future depends on a word or a gesture, twenty contradictory inspirations can traverse the mind in the time occupied by a flash of lightning.

On thus suddenly perceiving the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, Maurice d'Escorval's first thought was: How long has he been here? Has he been playing the spy? Has he been listening to us? What did he hear? His first impulse was to spring upon his enemy, to strike him in the face, and compel him to engage in a hand-to-hand struggle. The thought of Marie-Anne checked him, however. He reflected upon the possible, even probable, results of a quarrel arising under such circumstances. The combat which would ensue would cost this pure young girl her reputation. Martial would talk about it; and country folks are pitiless. He could imagine Marie-Anne becoming the talk of the neighborhood, and saw the

finger of scorn pointed at her. Accordingly, he made a great effort and mastered his anger. These reflections occupied merely a few seconds, and then young D'Escorval, politely touching his hat, advanced toward Martial and observed:

"You are a stranger, sir, and have no doubt lost your way?"

His words were ill-chosen, and defeated his prudent intentions. A curt "Mind your own business" would have been less wounding. He forgot that this word "stranger" was the most deadly insult that one could cast in the face of the former *emigres,* now returning in the rear of the Allies.

However, the young marquis did not change his nonchalant attitude. He touched the peak of his hunting cap with one finger, and replied: "It's true I've lost my way."

Marie-Anne, despite her agitation, easily perceived that her presence alone restrained the hatred animating these young men. Their attitude, and the glance with which they measured each other, plainly spoke of hostile feelings. If one of them was ready to spring upon the other, the latter was on the alert, prepared to defend himself.

A short pause followed the marquis's last words. At length he spoke again. "A peasant's directions are not generally remarkable for their clearness," he said, lightly; "and for more than an hour I have been trying to find the house to which M. Lacheneur has retired."

"Ah!"

"I am sent to him by the Duc de Sairmeuse, my father."

Knowing what he did, Maurice supposed that these strangely rapacious individuals had some fresh claim to make. "I thought," said he, "that all relations between M. Lacheneur and M. de Sairmeuse were broken off yesterday evening at the abbe's house."

This was said in the most provoking tone, and yet Martial never so much as frowned. He had sworn that he would remain calm, and he had strength enough to keep his word. "If these relations have been broken off," he replied, "believe me, M. d'Escorval, it is no fault of ours."

"Then it is not as people say?"

"What people? Who?"

"The people here in the neighborhood."

"Ah! And what do these people say?"

"The truth; that you have been guilty of an offense which a man of honor could never forgive nor forget."

The young marquis shook his head gravely. "Your condemnation is very hasty, sir," he said, coldly. "Permit me to hope that M. Lacheneur will be less severe than you are; and that his resentment, his just resentment, I confess, will vanish before a truthful explanation."

Martial profited by the effect he had produced to walk toward Marie-Anne, and, addressing himself exclusively to her, now seemed to completely ignore Maurice's presence. "For there has been a mistake—a misunderstanding, mademoiselle," he continued. "Do not doubt it. The Sairmeuses are not ingrates. How could any one have supposed that we would intentionally give offense to a devoted friend of our family, and that at a moment when he had rendered us such signal service! A true gentleman like my father, and a hero of probity like yours, can not fail to esteem each other. I admit that yesterday M. de Sairmeuse did not appear to advantage; but the step he takes to-day proves his sincere regret."

Certainly this was not the cavalier tone which Martial had employed in speaking to Marie-Anne for the first time on the square in front of the church. He had removed his cap, his attitude was full of deference, and he spoke as respectfully as though he were addressing some haughty duchess, instead of the humble daughter of that "rascal" Lacheneur. Was this only a *roue's* maneuvre? Or had a true sense of this noble girl's sterling worth penetrated his heart? Perhaps it was both. At all events it would have been difficult for him to say how far the homage he thus paid was intentional, and how far involuntary.

"My father," he continued, "is an old man who has had cruel sufferings. Exile is hard to bear. But if sorrow and deception have embittered his character, they have not changed his heart. His apparent imperiousness conceals a kindness of heart which I have often seen degenerate into positive weakness. And—why should I not confess it?—the Duc de Sairmeuse, with his white hair, still retains the illusions of a child. He refuses to believe that the world has progressed during the past twenty years. Moreover, people had deceived him by the most absurd fabrications. To speak plainly, even while we were in Montaignac, M. Lacheneur's enemies succeeded in prejudicing my father against him."

One might have sworn that Martial was speaking the truth; for his voice was so persuasive, and his glance, his gestures, and the expression on his face corresponded so fittingly with

his words. Maurice, who felt certain that young De Sairmeuse was lying, impudently lying, was abashed by this scientific prevarication, so universally practised in good society, but of which he was happily and utterly ignorant. However, if the marquis were lying, what did he want here, and what was the meaning of this farce?

"Need I tell you, mademoiselle," Martial resumed, "all that I suffered last evening in the little sitting-room in the parsonage? Never in my whole life can I recollect such a cruel moment! I understood, and I did honor to M. Lacheneur's heroism. Hearing of our arrival, he came without hesitation, without delay, to voluntarily surrender a princely fortune—and he was insulted. This excessive injustice horrified me. And if I did not openly protest against it—if I did not show my indignation—it was only because contradiction drives my father to the verge of frenzy. And what good would it have done for me to protest? Your filial love and piety had a far more powerful effect than any words of mine would have had. You were scarcely out of the house before the duke, already ashamed of his injustice, said to me: 'I have been wrong, but I am an old man; it is hard for me to decide to make the first advance; you, marquis, go and find M. Lacheneur, and obtain his forgiveness.'"

Marie-Anne, redder than a peony, and terribly embarrassed, lowered her eyes. "I thank you, sir," she faltered, "in my father's name—"

"Oh! do not thank me," interrupted Martial earnestly; "it will be my duty, on the contrary, to give *you* thanks, if you can induce M. Lacheneur to accept the reparation which is due to him—and he will accept it, if you will only condescend to plead our cause. Who could resist your sweet voice, your beautiful, beseeching eyes?"

However inexperienced Maurice might be, he could no longer fail to comprehend Martial's intentions. This man, whom he mortally hated already, dared to speak of love to Marie-Anne, and in his presence. In other words, the marquis, not content with having ignored and insulted him, presumed to take an insolent advantage of his supposed simplicity. The certainty of this outrage made his blood boil. He seized Martial by the arm, and threw him forcibly against a fir tree, several paces off. "This last is too much, Marquis de Sairmeuse!" he cried.

Maurice's attitude was so threatening that Martial fully ex-

pected another attack. He had fallen on one knee; without rising he now raised his gun, as if to take aim. It was not from anything like cowardice that the Marquis de Sairmeuse felt an impulse to fire upon an unarmed foe; but the affront which he had received was in his opinion so dastardly that he would have shot Maurice like a dog, rather than feel the weight of his hand upon his arm again.

For some minutes previously, Marie-Anne had been expecting and hoping for Maurice's outburst of anger. She was even more inexperienced than her lover; but she was a woman, and could not fail to understand the meaning of the young marquis's manner. He was evidently "paying his court to her." And with what intentions it was only too easy to divine. Her agitation, while the marquis spoke to her in an unceasingly tender voice, had changed at first to stupor, and then to indignation, as she realized his marvelous audacity. After that, how could she help blessing the act of violence which had curtailed a situation so insulting for herself and so humiliating for Maurice? An ordinary woman would have thrown herself between two men anxious to kill each other; but Marie-Anne remained impassive. Was it not Maurice's duty to protect her when she was insulted? Who, then, if not he, should defend her from this young roue's insolent gallantry? She would have blushed, she who was energy personified, to love a weak and pusillanimous man.

But, after all, intervention was quite unnecessary; for Maurice understood that the situation required him to be very cautious under penalty of giving the offending party the advantage. He felt that Marie-Anne must not be regarded as the cause of the quarrel; and this thought at once produced a powerful reaction in his mind. He recovered, as if by magic, his usual coolness and the free exercise of his faculties.

"Yes," he resumed, in a bold voice, "this is hypocrisy enough. To dare to prate of reparation after the insults that you and yours have inflicted is adding intentional humiliation to injury —and I will not permit it."

Martial had thrown aside his gun; he now rose, and with a phlegm he had learned in England, complacently brushed his dusty knee. He was too discerning not to perceive that Maurice had purposely disguised the true cause of his passionate outburst; and though he would not have been displeased if young D'Escorval had confessed the truth, the matter was after all of little moment.

However, it was necessary to make some reply, and to preserve the superiority which he imagined he had hitherto maintained. "You will never know, sir," he said, glancing alternately at his gun and at Marie-Anne, "all that you owe to Mademoiselle Lacheneur. We shall meet again, I hope—"

"You have made that remark before," Maurice interrupted, tauntingly. "Nothing is easier than to find me. The first peasant you meet will point out the Baron d'Escorval's house."

"Very good, sir, I can't promise but that two of my friends will call upon you."

"Oh! whenever you please!"

"Certainly; but it would gratify me to know by what right you make yourself the judge of M. Lacheneur's honor, and take upon yourself to defend what has not been attacked. Who has given you this right?"

From Martial's sneering tone, Maurice felt certain the marquis had overheard at least a part of his conversation with Marie-Anne. "My right," he replied, "is that of friendship. If I tell you that your advances are unwelcome, it is because I know that M. Lacheneur will accept nothing from you. No, nothing, no matter how you may disguise the alms you offer merely to appease your own consciences. He will never forgive the affront which is his honor and your shame. Ah! you thought to degrade him, Messieurs de Sairmeuse! and you have raised him far above your own mock grandeur. *He* receive anything from you! Go and learn that your millions can never give you a pleasure equal to the ineffable joy he will feel when he sees you roll by in your carriage, for he can say to himself: 'Those people owe everything to me!'"

Maurice spoke with such an intensity of feeling that Marie-Anne could not resist the impulse to press his hand; and this gesture was his revenge on Martial, who turned pale with passion.

"But I have still another right," continued Maurice. "My father yesterday had the honor of asking M. Lacheneur for his daughter's hand—"

"And I refused it!" cried a terrible voice.

The marquis, Marie-Anne, and Maurice turned with a movement of mingled alarm and surprise. M. Lacheneur was beside them, and just behind him stood Chanlouineau, surveying the group with threatening eyes.

"Yes, I refused it," resumed M. Lacheneur, "and I do not

believe that my daughter will marry any one without my consent. What did you promise me this morning, Marie-Anne? And yet you grant a rendezvous to gallants in the grove? Go home at once!"

"But, father—!"

"Go home!" he repeated angrily. "Go home, I command you."

Marie-Anne did not utter another word; but, with a look of resignation, turned to depart, though not without bestowing on Maurice a saddened gaze in which he read a last farewell.

As soon as she was some twenty paces off, M. Lacheneur, with folded arms, confronted the baron's son. "As for you, M. d'Escorval," said he, "I hope that you'll no longer prowl round about my daughter—"

"I swear to you, sir—"

"Oh, no oaths, if you please. It is an evil action to try and turn a young girl from her duty, which is obedience. You have severed forever all connection between your family and mine."

Maurice tried to excuse himself; but M. Lacheneur interrupted him. "Enough! enough!" said he; "go back home."

And as the young fellow hesitated, he seized him by the collar and dragged him to the little footpath, leading through the grove. This was the work of scarcely ten seconds, and yet Lacheneur found time to whisper in Maurice's ear, in his former friendly tones: "Go, you young wretch! do you want to render all my precautions useless?"

He watched Maurice as the latter disappeared, bewildered by the scene he had witnessed, and stupefied by what he had just heard; and it was not until the late lord of Sairmeuse saw that young D'Escorval was out of hearing that he turned to Martial. "As I have had the honor of meeting you, M. le Marquis," said he, "I deem it my duty to inform you that Chupin and his sons are searching for you everywhere. It is at the request of the duke, your father, who is anxious for you to go at once to the Chateau de Courtornieu." Then, turning to Chanlouineau, he added: "We will now proceed on our way."

But Martial detained him with a gesture. "I am much surprised to hear that they are seeking me," said he. "My father knows very well where he sent me—I was going to your house, at his request."

"To my house?"

"Yes, to your house, to express our sincere regret for the scene which took place at the parsonage yesterday evening." And then, without waiting for any rejoinder, Martial, with wonderful cleverness and felicity of expression, began to repeat to the father the story he had just related to the daughter. According to his version, the duke and himself were in despair. How could M. Lacheneur suppose them guilty of such black ingratitude? Why had he retired so precipitately? The Duc de Sairmeuse held at M. Lacheneur's disposal any amount which it might please him to mention—sixty, a hundred thousand francs, even more.

But M. Lacheneur did not appear to be dazzled in the least; and when Martial had concluded, he replied respectfully, but coldly, that he would consider the matter.

This coldness amazed Chanlouineau, who when the marquis, after many earnest protestations, at last turned his face homeward, naively declared: "We have misjudged these people."

But M. Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders. "And so you are foolish enough to suppose that he offered all that money to *me*?"

"Zounds! I have ears."

"Ah well! my poor boy, you must not believe all they hear if you have. The truth is, these large sums were intended to win my daughter's favor. She has taken the marquis's fancy, and—he wishes to make her his mistress—"

Chanlouineau, stopped short, with eyes flashing and hands clenched. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "prove that and I am yours, body and soul—to do anything you like!"

VII

"AH, what a girl she is, this Marie-Anne Lacheneur. I've never met the like of her before—what beauty, grace, and dignity combined—" thus soliloquized Martial when after leaving the grove he turned in the direction of Sairmeuse. At the risk of losing his way he took what seemed to be the shortest course, cutting across the fields and leaping the ditches with the aid of

his gun. He found a peculiar pleasure in picturing Marie-Anne as he had just seen her. Now blushing and growing pale with frightened modesty, and now raising her head with haughty pride and disdain. Who would have suspected that such girlish artlessness and such outward frigidity of manner concealed an energetic nature and an impassioned soul? What an expression of love lighted up her large black eyes when she glanced at young D'Escorval! Ah, to be looked at thus only for a moment was felicity indeed. No wonder that Maurice d'Escorval was madly in love with her. Was not he—the marquis—in love with her himself? "Ah," exclaimed he, "come what may she shall be mine."

Thus meditating, the Marquis de Sairmeuse turned to the strategic side of the question—to assist him in the study of which he was, despite his recent manhood, able to bring considerable experience. His debut, he was forced to admit, had been neither fortunate nor adroit. Compliments and offers of money had alike been rejected. If Marie-Anne had heard his covert insinuations with evident horror, M. Lacheneur had received with even more than coldness his repeated offers of actual wealth. Moreover, he remembered Chanlouineau's terrible eyes; and the way the sturdy rustic measured him. Had Marie-Anne made but a sign, the young farmer would have crushed him like an egg-shell, without the least thought of his noble ancestors. Probably the stalwart young peasant was another of Marie-Anne's visitors, in which case there would be three rivals for her favor. However, the more difficult the undertaking seemed, the more Martial's passions were inflamed. He reflected that his blunders might after all be repaired; for occasions of meeting would not be wanting, since he must have frequent interviews with M. Lacheneur in effecting a formal transfer of Sairmeuse. If he could only win the father over to his side. With the daughter his course was plain. Profiting by experience he must henceforth be as timid as he had hitherto been bold, and she would be hard to please if she were not flattered by such a triumph of her beauty. Young D'Escorval remained to be disposed of. True, the baron's son had been rudely dismissed by M. Lacheneur, and yet the latter's anger seemed rather far-fetched to be absolutely real. Was this incident merely a comedy, and if so who had Lacheneur wished to deceive—he—the marquis—or Chanlouineau? And then, if there *had* been deception, what could have been its motive? On

the other hand it was impossible to call young D'Escorval to account for his insolence, for if even a pretext were found, Marie-Anne would never forgive the man who raised his hand against one who, for the time being, was apparently her favored lover—so, hard as it was, Martial must yet swallow Maurice's affront in silence. Ah, he would have given a handsome sum to any one who would have devised a means of sending the baron's son away from the neighborhood.

Revolving in his mind these ideas and plans, the precise consequence of which he could neither calculate nor foresee, Martial was walking up the avenue leading to the Chateau de Sairmeuse when he heard hurried footsteps behind him. He turned and paused on seeing two men running after him and motioning him to stop. The younger was one of Father Chupin's sons, and the other the old rascal himself.

The quondam poacher had been enrolled among the servants charged with preparing Sairmeuse for the duke's reception; and he was already doing everything in his power to make himself indispensable. "Ah, M. le Marquis," he cried, "we have been searching for you everywhere, my son and I. It was M. le Duc—"

"Very well," said Martial dryly. "I am returning—"

But Chupin was not oversensitive; and, despite his curt reception, he ventured to follow the marquis, at a little distance behind it is true, but still sufficiently near to make himself heard. He also had his schemes, and it was not long before he began to repeat all the calumnies that had lately been spread about the neighborhood in reference to Lacheneur. Why did he choose this subject in preference to any other? Did he suspect the young marquis's passion for Marie-Anne? Perhaps so; at all events he described Lacheneur (he no longer styled him "Monsieur") as a thorough rascal. The complete surrender of Sairmeuse, he said, was only a farce, for Marie-Anne's father must possess thousands, and hundreds of thousands, of francs, since he was about to marry his daughter. Any suspicions the old scoundrel may have entertained became certainties when he heard Martial eagerly ask, "What! is Mademoiselle Lacheneur going to be married?"

"Yes, sir."

"And who's the happy man?"

"Why, Chanlouineau, the fellow the peasants wanted to kill yesterday on the market-place because he was so disrespectful

to the duke. He is an avaricious man; and if Marie-Anne does not bring him a good round sum as a dowry, he will never marry her, no matter how beautiful she may be."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"Oh, it's quite true. My eldest son heard from Chanlouineau and from Lacheneur that the wedding would take place within a month." And turning to his son, the old knave added: "Is it not true, boy?"

"Yes," promptly replied the youth, although he had heard nothing of the kind.

Martial made no rejoinder. Perhaps he was ashamed at having allowed himself to listen to all this tittle-tattle; though on the other hand he could not but feel grateful to Chupin for such important information. Lacheneur's conduct now appeared all the more mysterious. Why had he refused to give his daughter to Maurice d'Escorval? why did he wish to marry her to a peasant? His conduct must be guided by some potent motive.

Thus cogitating, the young marquis reached Sairmeuse, where a strange scene awaited him. On the broad gravel walk intervening between the peristyle of the chateau and the lawn a huge pile of furniture, crockery, linen, and clothes might be perceived. Half a dozen lackeys were running to and fro executing the orders of the Duc de Sairmeuse, who stood on the threshold of the building, and a passer-by would have supposed that the occupants of the chateau were moving. To Martial the scene was inexplicable. Approaching his father, and saluting him respectfully, he inquired what it meant.

The duke burst into a hearty laugh. "Why, can't you guess?" he replied. "Why, it's very simple. When the lawful master returns home he finds it delightful the first night to sleep under the usurper's counterpane, but afterward it is not so pleasant. Everything here reminds me too forcibly of M. Lacheneur. It seems to me that I am in his house, and the thought is unendurable. So I have had them collect everything belonging to him and to his daughter—everything in fact which did not belong to the chateau in former years, and the servants will put all these goods and chattels into a cart and carry them to him."

The young marquis gave fervent thanks to heaven that he had arrived before it was too late. Had his father's project been executed, he might have bid farewell to all his hopes for-

ever. "You don't surely mean to do this, M. le Duc?'" he said earnestly.

"And why not, pray? Who can prevent me from doing it?"

"No one, most assuredly. But you yourself will decide on reflection that a man who has not conducted himself *too* badly has at least a right to some consideration."

The duke seemed greatly astonished. "Consideration!" he exclaimed. "This rascal has a right to some consideration! You must be joking surely. What! I give him—that is to say—you give him a hundred thousand francs, and that doesn't satisfy him! He is entitled to consideration! You, who are after the daughter, may treat him to as much consideration as you like, but *I* shall do as I please!"

"You have a perfect right to do so, M. le Duc," replied Martial, "but I would respectfully observe that if I were in your place I should think twice before acting. Lacheneur has surrendered Sairmeuse; that is all very well, but how can you authenticate your claim to the property? Suppose you imprudently irritated him. What would you do if he changed his mind? What would become of your right to the estate?"

M. Sairmeuse turned livid. "Zounds!" he exclaimed. "I had not thought of that. Here, you fellows, take all these things indoors again, and quickly!" And as the lackeys prepared to obey his orders, "Now," he remarked, "let us hasten to Courtornieu. They have already sent for us twice. It must be business of the utmost importance which demands our attention."

The Chateau de Courtornieu is, next to that of Sairmeuse, the most magnificent seigniorial seat in the district of Montaignac. When the carriage conveying Martial and his father turned from the public highway into the long narrow, rough by-road leading to this historic mansion, the jolting aroused the duke from a profound reverie into which he had fallen on leaving Sairmeuse.

The marquis thought that he had caused this unusual fit of abstraction. "It is the result of my adroit maneuvre," he said to himself, not without secret satisfaction. "Until the restitution of Sairmeuse is legalized, I can make my father do anything I wish; yes, anything. And if it is necessary, he will even invite Lacheneur and Marie-Anne to his table."

Martial was mistaken, however. The duke had already forgotten the matter, for his most vivid impressions were more fleeting than the briefest summer shower. After suddenly

lowering the glass window in front of the carriage, and ordering the coachman to walk his horses up the road, he turned to his son and remarked: "Let us have a few minutes' chat. Are you really in love with that girl Lacheneur?"

Martial could not repress a start. "Oh! in love," said he, lightly, "that would perhaps be saying too much. Let me say she has taken my fancy, that will be sufficient."

The duke glanced at his son with a bantering air. "Really, you delight me!" he exclaimed. "I feared that this love affair might derange, at least for the moment, certain plans that I have formed—for I have formed certain plans for you."

"The deuce!"

"Yes, I have my plans, and I will communicate them to you later in detail. I will content myself to-day by recommending you to study Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu."

Martial made no reply. This recommendation was indeed superfluous. If Mademoiselle Lacheneur had made him forget momentarily Mademoiselle de Courtornieu that morning, the remembrance of Marie-Anne was now effaced by the radiant image of Blanche.

"Before discussing the daughter," resumed the duke, "let us speak of the father. He is one of my best friends; and I know him thoroughly. You have heard men reproach me for what they style my prejudices, haven't you? Well, in comparison with the Marquis de Courtornieu, I am only a mere Jacobin."

"Oh! father!"

"Really, such is the case. If I am behind the age in which I live, he belongs to the reign of Louis XIV. Only—for there is an only—the principles which I openly profess, he keeps locked up in his snuff-box—and trust him for not forgetting to open it at the proper moment. He has suffered cruelly for his opinions, in the sense of having so often been obliged to conceal them. He concealed them, first, under the Consulate, when he returned from exile. He dissimulated them even more courageously under the Empire—for he played the part of a chamberlain to Bonaparte, this dear marquis. But, hush! don't remind him of that proof of heroism; he has bitterly deplored it since the battle of Lutzen."

This was the tone in which M. de Sairmeuse was accustomed to speak of his best friends. "The history of the marquis's fortune," he continued, "is the history of his marriages —I say marriages, because he has married a number of times,

and always advantageously. Yes, in a period of fifteen years he has had the misfortune to lose three wives, each richer than the other. His daughter's mother was his third and last wife, a Cisse Blossac—who died in 1809. He comforted himself after each bereavement by purchasing a quantity of lands or bonds. So that now he is as rich as you are, and his influence is powerful and widespread. I forgot one detail, however. He believes, they tell me, in the growing power of the clergy, and has become very devout."

The duke checked himself, for the carriage had entered the marquis's grounds, and was now approaching the grand entrance of the Chateau de Courtornieu. As the wheels grated over the gravel, M. de Courtornieu himself appeared on the threshold of the mansion and hastily descended the steps to receive his guests in person. This was a flattering distinction, which he seldom lavished upon his visitors. The marquis was long rather than tall, and very solemn in deportment. His angular form was surmounted by a remarkably small head (a distinctive characteristic of his race), covered with thin, glossy black hair, and lighted by cold, round black eyes. The pride that becomes a nobleman, and the humility that befits a Christian, were continually at war with each other in his countenance. He pressed the hands of MM. de Sairmeuse with a great show of friendship, and overwhelmed them with compliments expressed in a thin, nasal voice, which, coming from his elongated frame, was as astonishing as would be the sound of a flute issuing from the pipes of an orphicleide.

"At last you have come," he said; "we were waiting for you before beginning to deliberate on a very grave and delicate matter. We are thinking of addressing a petition to his majesty. The nobility, who have suffered so much during the Revolution, have a right to expect ample compensation. Our neighbors, to the number of sixteen, are now assembled in my cabinet, transformed for the time into a council chamber."

Martial shuddered at the thought of all the ridiculous and tiresome conversation he would probably be obliged to listen to; and his father's recommendation occurred to him. "Shall we not have the honor of paying our respects to Mademoiselle de Courtornieu!" he asked.

"My daughter must be in the drawing-room with our cousin," replied the marquis in an indifferent tone, "at least, if she is not in the garden."

This might be construed as, "Go and look for her if you choose." At any rate so Martial understood the marquis; and accordingly, when the hall was reached, he allowed his father and M. de Courtornieu to go upstairs without him. At his request a servant opened the drawing-room door, but he found that apartment empty. He then turned into the garden, and after a fruitless search was retracing his steps toward the house, when, in the recesses of a shady bower, he espied the flowing folds of a white silk dress. Surmising that the wearer of this dainty toilet was Mademoiselle de Courtornieu, he advanced toward the bower, and his heart throbbed quicker when he perceived that he was right. Mademoiselle Blanche was seated on a garden bench beside an elderly lady to whom she was reading a letter in a low voice. She was evidently greatly preoccupied, since she did not hear Martial's approach. Pausing at about a dozen paces from the bower the susceptible young marquis lingered, blissfully contemplating the charming tableau presented to his gaze.

Blanche de Courtornieu was not absolutely beautiful; but she was as pretty, as piquant, and as dainty as heart could desire. Bewitching indeed were her large velvety blue eyes, her dimpled chin, and fresh pouting lips. She was a blonde—but one of those dazzling, radiant blondes found only in the countries of the sun—and her hair, drawn high upon the top of her head, escaped on all sides in a profusion of glittering ringlets which seemed almost to sparkle in the play of the light breeze. One might, perhaps, have wished her a trifle taller. But she had the winning charm of all delicately formed women; and her figure was deliciously symmetrical and admirably proportioned.

The old axiom that appearances are often deceitful could not, however, have been better exemplified than in the case of this apparently innocent, artless girl. The candor sparkling in her eyes concealed a parched, hollow soul, worthy of an experienced woman of the world, or of some old courtier. Being the only daughter of a millionaire *grand-seigneur*, she had been so petted by all who approached her, so bespattered with adulation that every good quality she might have possessed had been blighted in the bud by the poisonous breath of flattery. She was only nineteen; and still it was impossible for any one to have been more susceptible to the charms of wealth and ambition. She dreamed of a position at court as most girls dream of a lover. If she had deigned to notice Martial—and she had remarked

him—it was only because her father had told her that this young man might raise his wife to the highest sphere of power—a statement she had greeted with a "Very well, we will see!" that would have changed an enamored suitor's love into disgust.

After Martial had loitered a few minutes in contemplation he made up his mind to advance, and Mademoiselle Blanche, on seeing him, sprang up with a pretty affectation of intense timidity. Bowing low before her, the young marquis exclaimed in a tone of profound deference: "M. de Courtornieu, mademoiselle, was so kind as to tell me where I might have the honor of finding you. I had not courage enough to brave those formidable discussions indoors; but—" He paused, and pointing to the letter the young girl held in her hand, he added: "But I fear that I am interrupting you."

"Oh! not in the least, Monsieur le Marquis, although this letter which I have just been reading has, I confess, deeply interested me. It was written by a poor child in whom I have taken a great interest—whom I have sent for at times when I felt lonely—Marie-Anne Lacheneur."

Accustomed from his infancy to the hypocrisy of drawing-rooms, the young marquis had taught his face not to betray his feelings. He could have laughed gaily with anguish at his heart; he could have preserved the sternest gravity when inwardly convulsed with merriment. And yet, the mention of Marie-Anne's name coming from Mademoiselle de Courtornieu caused his glance to waver. The thought that they knew each other flashed through his brain, and then with equal rapidity he recovered his self-possession. But Mademoiselle de Courtornieu had perceived his momentary agitation. "What can it mean?" she wondered, much disturbed. Still, it was with a perfect assumption of innocence that she continued: "In fact, you must have seen her, this poor Marie-Anne, M. le Marquis, since her father was the guardian of Sairmeuse?"

"Yes, I have seen her, mademoiselle," replied Martial, quietly.

"Is she not remarkably beautiful? Her beauty is of an unusual type, it quite takes one by surprise."

A fool would have protested. The marquis was not guilty of such folly. "Yes, she is very beautiful," said he.

Blanche de Courtornieu was slightly disconcerted by this apparent frankness; and it was with an air of hypocritical compassion that she murmured: "Poor girl! What will become of her? Here is her father reduced to digging the ground."

"Oh! you exaggerate, mademoiselle; my father will always preserve Lacheneur from anything of that kind."

"Of course—I might have known that—but where will he find a husband for Marie-Anne?"

"One has been found already. I understand that she is to marry a farmer in the neighborhood, who has some little property—a young fellow named Chanlouineau."

Mademoiselle le Courtornieu, with all her apparent artlessness, was more cunning than the marquis. She had satisfied herself that she had just grounds for her suspicions; and she experienced a certain anger on finding him so well informed in regard to everything that concerned Mademoiselle Lacheneur. "And do you fancy this is the husband she dreamed of?" she inquired, still in a tone of affected benevolence. "Ah, well! God grant that she may be happy; for we were very fond of her, very—were we not, Aunt Medea?"

"Yes, very," replied Aunt Medea, who was the elderly lady seated on the bench beside the Courtornieu heiress. She was a poor relation whom M. de Courtornieu had installed at the chateau as his daughter's chaperone, and she earned her daily bread by playing the part of echo to the authoritative Blanche.

"It grieves me to see these friendly relations, which were so dear to me, broken off," resumed Mademoiselle de Courtornieu. "But listen to what Marie-Anne writes." So saying, she produced Madeomiselle Lacheneur's letter and read as follows: "My dear Blanche—You know that the Duc de Sairmeuse has returned. The news fell upon us like a thunderbolt. My father and I had grown too accustomed to consider the deposit entrusted to our fidelity as our own property, and now we have been punished for doing so. At least we have done our duty, and now everything is finished. She whom you have called your friend will henceforth be only a poor peasant girl, as her mother was before her."

The most attentive observer would have supposed that Mademoiselle Blanche was experiencing the keenest emotion. One would have sworn that it was only by intense effort that she succeeded in restraining her tears—that they were even trembling beneath the long lashes shading her eyes. In point of fact, however, she was trying to discover some indication of Martial's feelings. But now he was on his guard, and he listened to the perusal of the note with an imperturbable air. She continued:

"I should not be telling the truth if I said that I have not suffered on account of this sudden change. But I have courage left, and I shall learn how to submit. I shall, I hope, also have strength to forget, for I *must* forget! The remembrances of past happiness would make my present misery intolerable."

Mademoiselle de Courtornieu suddenly folded up the letter. "Can you understand such pride as that?" said she. "And they accuse us daughters of the nobility of being proud!"

Martial made no response. He felt that his trembling voice would betray him. Great as was the emotion he concealed, it would have been all the greater if he had been allowed to read the concluding lines:—

"One must live, my dear Blanche," added Marie-Anne, "and I feel no false shame in asking you to aid me. I sew very nicely, as you know, and I could earn my livelihood by embroidery if I knew more people. I will call to-day at Courtornieu to ask you to give me a list of ladies to whom I can present myself on your recommendation."

But Mademoiselle de Courtornieu had taken good care not to allude to this touching request. She had read the commencement of the letter to Martial as a test, and plainly perceived that if her new-born suspicions were correct, at all events the young marquis was resolved not to betray himself any further. Rising from the bench, she now accepted his arm to return to the house. She seemed to have forgotten her friend, and soon engaged in a gay flirtation. They were sauntering along toward the chateau, when the sound of voices engaged in animated debate reached their ears. The council convened in M. de Courtornieu's cabinet was angrily discussing the proposed address to the king.

Mademoiselle Blanche paused. "I am trespassing upon your kindness, M. le Marquis," said she. "I am boring you with my silly chatter when you would undoubtedly prefer to be up stairs."

"Certainly not," replied Martial laughing. "What should I do there? Men of action only intervene when the orators have finished."

He spoke so energetically, in spite of his jesting tone, that Mademoiselle de Courtornieu was fascinated. She saw before her, she believed, a man who, as her father had said, would rise to the highest position in the political world. Unfortunately, her admiration was disturbed by a ring at the great

bell which always announced visitors. She faltered, let go her hold on Martial's arm, and exclaimed in an earnest tone. "Ah, no matter. I wish very much to know what is going on up stairs. If I ask my father he will laugh at my curiosity, while you, if you are present at the conference, can tell me everything."

A wish thus expressed was a command. Martial bowed and withdrew. "She dismisses me," he said to himself as he mounted the staircase, "nothing could be more evident; and that without much ceremony. Why the deuce did she want to get rid of me?"

Why? Because that single peal of the bell announced a visitor to her; because she was expecting a visit from the former friend whose letter she had just been reading; and because she wished at any cost to prevent a meeting between Martial and Marie-Anne. She did not love the young marquis, and yet an agony of jealousy was torturing her. Such was the nature of Mademoiselle Blanche.

Her presentiments were realized. It was indeed Mademoiselle Lacheneur whom she found awaiting her in the drawing-room. Marie-Anne was paler than usual; but nothing in her manner betrayed the frightful anguish she had suffered during the past few days. In asking her former friend for a list of ladies to whom she could recommend her, she spoke as calmly and as quietly as in former days when she had ofttimes called at Courtornieu and invited Blanche to spend a day at Sairmeuse. Then the two girls embraced each other, their roles were reversed. It was Marie-Anne who had been crushed by misfortune; but it was Blanche who wept. However, while writing down the names of the persons in the neighborhood with whom she was acquainted, Mademoiselle de Courtornieu did not neglect this favorable opportunity for verifying the suspicions which Martial's momentary agitation had roused in her breast.

"It is inconceivable," she remarked to her friend, "that the Duc de Sairmeuse should allow you to be reduced to such an extremity."

Marie-Anne's nature was so loyal, that although the remark was leveled against a man who had treated her father most cruelly, she at once resented its injustice. "The duke is not to blame," she replied gently, "he offered us a very considerable sum, this morning, through his son."

Mademoiselle Blanche started as if a viper had stung her. "So you have seen the Marquis, Marie-Anne?" she said.

"Yes."

"Has he been to your house?"

"He was going there, when he met me in the grove near La Reche." As Marie-Anne spoke the recollection of Martial's impertinent gallantry brought a blush to her cheeks.

Blanche, despite her precocious experience, misunderstood the cause of her friend's confusion. Still she was an adept at dissimulation, and she took leave of Marie-Anne with every outward sign of sincere affection. In reality, however, she was wellnigh suffocating with rage. "What!" she thought, "they have met but once, and yet they are so strongly impressed with one another! Do they love each other already?"

VIII

BLANCHE DE COURTORNIEU would probably have been extremely astonished if Martial had faithfully reported to her everything he heard in her father's cabinet. He was himself passably amazed by the opinions he heard expressed and the projects he heard enunciated. Above all, he was really disgusted with the ridiculous greed displayed by M. de Courtornieu's noble guests. Decorations, fortune, honors, power—they desired everything. They were satisfied that their sentimental devotion to the throne deserved the most munificent rewards; and it was only the most modest among them, who declared that he would rest content with the epaulets of lieutenant-general. Recrimination, rancor, and reproach were persistently indulged in, and the Marquis de Courtornieu, who acted as president of the council, soon grew exhausted with exclaiming: "Be calm, gentlemen, be calm! A little moderation, if you please!"

"All these men are mad," thought Martial, with difficulty restraining an intense desire to laugh; "they are insane enough to be placed in an asylum."

It so happened that he was not obliged to render a report

of what transpired, for soon after his arrival in the cabinet the deliberations were fortunately interrupted by a summons to dinner, and when he rejoined Blanche, she had quite forgotten to question him about the doings of the council. In fact, what were these people's hopes and plans to her? These greedy nobles were all below her father in rank, and most of them were much less rich than he. Moreover, a matter of personal interest had engaged all her attention. She had been absorbed in thought, since Marie-Anne's departure—in thought of Martial, with whose mind and person she was decidedly pleased. He possessed all the qualifications an ambitious woman could desire in a husband—and she had decided that *she* would marry him. She would most likely not have arrived at this conclusion so quickly, had it not been for the feeling of jealousy, aroused in her mind by the belief that he was coveted by another woman, for the heart had nothing to do with her new-born desire, which was one of those counterfeit brain passions so often mistaken for real love. As for the outcome of her fancy, she never once thought that she might possibly reap defeat in lieu of victory: for over and over again had her flatterers told her that the man she chose must esteem himself fortunate above all others. She had seen her father besieged by so many suitors for her hand; and, besides, her mirror told her that she was as pretty—nay, far prettier than Marie-Anne; while she possessed other advantages which her rival could lay no claim to; birth, wit, and a genius for coquetry!

The result of Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's meditations was that during dinner she exercised all her powers of fascination upon the young marquis. She was so evidently desirous of pleasing him that several of the guests remarked it. Some were even shocked by her forwardness. But Blanche de Courtornieu could do as she chose, as she herself was well aware. Was she not the richest heiress for miles and miles around? No slander can tarnish the brilliancy of such a fortune as she would one day possess.

Martial yielded unresistingly to the charm of his position. How could he suspect unworthy motives in a girl whose eyes had such an expression of virgin purity, and whose laugh bespoke the happy gaiety of innocent maidenhood. Involuntarily he compared the seemingly light-hearted Blanche with the grave and thoughtful Marie-Anne, and his imagination turned from

one to the other, inflamed by the strangeness of the contrast. He occupied a seat beside Mademoiselle de Courtornieu at table, and they chatted gaily, amusing themselves at the expense of the other guests, who were again conversing upon political matters, and whose royalist enthusiasm waxed warmer and warmer as the repast proceeded. Champagne was served with the dessert; and the company drank to the Allies by the force of whose victorious bayonets the king had managed to return to Paris; they drank to the English, to the Prussians, and to the Russians, whose horses were trampling the harvests of France under foot.

The name of D'Escorval heard above the clink of the glasses, suddenly roused Martial from his dream of enchantment. An old nobleman had just risen, and proposed that active measures should be taken to rid the neighborhood of the Baron d'Escorval. "Such a man's presence dishonors our province," said he, "he is a frantic Jacobin, and Fouche has him on the list of suspected persons, a plain proof that he is a dangerous character. Even now he is under the surveillance of the police."

Had M. d'Escorval heard these remarks, and had he seen the savage glances which the listeners exchanged, he would certainly have felt anxious for his safety. Still, if the old nobleman's proposal met with approving looks, the various guests plainly hesitated about giving it their formal sanction. Martial's easy gaiety of a moment before had now quite vanished, and he was as pale as death. A terrible struggle was going on in his mind—a conflict between honor and desire. A few hours previously he had longed for a means to get rid of Maurice, and now the opportunity presented itself. It was impossible to imagine a better one. If the old nobleman's proposals were adopted, the Baron d'Escorval and his family would be forced to leave France forever!

Martial noted the hesitation of the company, and felt that a word from him would probably decide the matter. What should he do—should he second the suggestion or oppose it? He did not reflect for long. The voice of honor imperatively commanded him to do his duty. Rising from his seat he declared that the suggestion was most impolitic. "M. d'Escorval," he said, "is one of those men whose spirit of honesty and justice has made him rightly popular. He fully deserves the general esteem in which he is held in the district. And by attacking

him you would make many malcontents among those whose support it is our duty to obtain in the interests of the monarchy."

The young marquis's cold and haughty manner, his few but incisive words decided the question. "We had better leave the baron alone. It would be a great mistake to attack him," such were the comments exchanged on every side.

When Martial sat down again Blanche de Courtornieu leant toward him. "You have acted rightly," she murmured. "I see you know how to defend your friends."

"M. d'Escorval is not my friend," replied Martial, in a voice which revealed the struggle through which he had passed. "The injustice of the proposal incensed me, that is all."

Mademoiselle de Courtornieu was not to be deceived by an explanation like this. Still, feigning to accept it, she quietly added: "Then your conduct is all the more admirable, M. le Marquis."

Such was not the opinion of the Duc de Sairmeuse, however. On returning to the chateau some hours later, he reproached his son for his intervention. "Why the deuce did you meddle with the matter?" he inquired. "I should not have liked to take upon myself the odium of the proposition, but since it had been made—"

"I was anxious to prevent such an act of useless folly!"

"Useless folly! Zounds! marquis, you carry matters with a high hand. Do you think that cursed baron adores you? What would you say if you heard that he was conspiring against us?"

"I should answer with a shrug of the shoulders."

"You would! Very well then, just do me the favor to question Chupin."

The Duc de Sairmeuse had only been a fortnight in France; he had scarcely shaken the dust of exile from his feet, and already his imagination saw enemies on every side. He had slept but two nights in the chateau of his forefathers, and yet he accepted the venomous reports which Chupin poured into his ears as unhesitatingly as if they had been gospel truth. The suspicions which he tried to instil into Martial's mind were, however, cruelly unjust.

At the very moment when the duke accused M. d'Escorval of conspiring against the house of Sairmeuse, the baron was weeping at the bedside of his son, whose life he feared for. Maurice was indeed dangerously ill. Mental agony had over-

come him and with his nervous organism the circumstance was not surprising. After leaving the grove near La Reche in obedience with M. Lacheneur's orders, he had mechanically returned home, a hundred conflicting thoughts battling in his mind. What did it all mean? The marquis's insults, Lacheneur's feigned anger, Marie-Anne's obstinacy—all the incidents in which he had just taken part combined to crush him; and so singular was his demeanor that the peasants who met him on the way felt convinced that some great calamity had befallen the D'Escorval family. When he reached home his mother experienced a terrible shock on perceiving the wild, haggard expression of his features. Still he had enough strength of mind left to try and reassure her. "It is all over," he exclaimed in a tremulous voice, "but don't be worried, mother; for I have some courage left, as you shall see."

He did, in fact, seat himself at the dinner-table with a resolute air. He ate even more than usual; and his father noticed, without alluding to it, that he drank more wine than he was in the habit of doing. He was very pale, his eyes glittered, his manner and appearance were suggestive of the febrile agitation from which he was suffering, and he spoke in a husky tone, talking much and at times even jesting.

"Why don't he cry," thought Madame d'Escorval; "then I shouldn't be so much alarmed, and I could try to comfort him."

This was Maurice's last effort. Directly dinner was over he went upstairs to his room, and when his mother, after repeatedly listening at the door, finally decided to enter and ascertain what he was about, she found him lying upon the bed, muttering incoherently. He did not appear to recognize or even to see her; and when she spoke to him, he did not seem to hear. His face was scarlet, and his lips were parched. She took hold of his hand and found that it was burning, and this although his body trembled and his teeth chattered as if with cold.

No words could describe Madame d'Escorval's agony on making this discovery. For a moment she feared she was about to faint: but, summoning all her strength, she sprang to the staircase, and cried: "Help! help! My son is dying!"

With a bound, M. d'Escorval reached his son's room, and, after a brief inspection, instructed a servant to saddle a horse and gallop to Montaignac for a doctor without delay. It is

true that there was a medical man at Sairmeuse, but he was a disgrace to his profession. After serving for a short time as an army surgeon he had been dismissed for absolute incompetency. The peasants shunned him as they would have shunned the plague; and in cases of sickness they always sent for the village cure. M. d'Escorval now followed their example, in this respect well knowing that the physician from Montaignac could not possibly arrive long before morning.

The Abbe Midon had never frequented a medical school, but since he had been ordained to Sairmeuse the poor had so often asked for his advice that he had applied himself to the study of medicine, and, aided by experience, had acquired a knowledge of the healing art well worthy of a faculty diploma. No matter at what hour of the day or night his parishioners chanced to beg his help, he was always ready—and the same answer invariably greeted their appeals: "Let us go at once." Thus, when the people of the neighborhood met him on the road with his little medicine bag slung over his shoulder, they doffed their hats respectfully and stood aside to let him pass. Those who did not respect the priest honored the man.

When the abbe learnt that M. d'Escorval needed his advice he set out at once. The baron was his friend, and he was anxious to do everything in his power to save young Maurice, whom the frightened messenger described as almost dead. The priest was just in sight of Escorval when the baroness rushed out to meet him, and her manner was so suggestive of despair that the abbe feared she was about to announce some irreparable misfortune. But, no—she took his hand, and, without uttering a word, led him to her son's room. Maurice's condition was indeed critical, but it was not hopeless, as the priest at once perceived. "We will get him out of this," he said with a smile that reawakened hope.

And then, with the coolness of an old practitioner, he bled his patient freely, and ordered applications of ice to his head. In a moment all the household was busy executing the cure's various orders. He took advantage of the opportunity thus offered to draw the baron aside and inquire what had happened.

"A disappointment in love," replied M. d'Escorval, with a despairing gesture. "Yesterday afternoon M. Lacheneur refused to let his daughter marry Maurice, who, however, was

to have seen Marie-Anne to-day. What passed between them I don't know, but you see what is the result."

At this moment the baroness reentered the room, and the abbe was unable to make any rejoinder. Maurice was now more excited than ever; and in his delirium he frequently muttered the names of Marie-Anne, Martial de Sairmeuse, and Chanlouineau. The hours slowly passed without bringing any change in his condition, and the vigil, shared by the distressed parents and their friend the priest, was an anxious one indeed. Dawn was just at hand, when the stillness out of doors was broken by the sound of a horse's hoofs approaching at a swift gallop along the neighboring highway. A few minutes later and the doctor from Montaignac entered the house.

"There is no motive for immediate alarm," he said, after carefully examining Maurice and conferring with the abbe. Nothing more could be done at present. The fever must take its course, but I will return to-morrow."

He did return every day during the ensuing week, and not until his eighth visit did he proclaim Maurice to be out of danger. Then it was that the Baron d'Escorval sought information concerning the cause of this dangerous attack, and learnt from his son what had transpired in the pine grove near La Reche.

"Are you sure," asked the baron, when Maurice had finished his narrative, "are you sure that you correctly understood Marie-Anne's reply? Did she really tell you that even if her father gave his consent to your marriage she would refuse hers?"

"Those were her very words."

"And still she loves you?"

"I am sure of it."

"You were not mistaken in M. Lacheneur's tone when he said to you: 'Be off, you young wretch! do you want to render all my precautions useless?"

"No."

M. d'Escorval sat for a moment in silence. "This passes comprehension," he murmured at last. And then so low that his son could not hear him, he added: "I will see Lacheneur to-morrow: this mystery must be explained."

IX

THE cottage where M. Lacheneur had taken refuge stood on a hill overlooking the river. It was a small and humble dwelling, though scarcely so miserable in its aspect and appointments as most of the peasant abodes round about. It comprised a single story divided into three rooms and roofed with thatch. In front was a tiny garden, where a vine straggling over the walls of the house, a few fruit trees, and some withered vegetables just managed to exist. Small as was this garden patch, and limited as was its production, still Lacheneur's aunt, to whom the dwelling had formerly belonged, had only succeeded in conquering the natural sterility of the soil after long years of patient perseverance. Day after day, during a lengthy period, she had regularly spread in front of the cottage three or four basketfuls of arable soil brought from a couple of miles distant; and though she had been dead for more than a twelvemonth, one could still detect a narrow pathway across the waste, worn by her patient feet in the performance of this daily task.

This was the path which M. d'Escorval, faithful to his resolution, took the following day, in the hope of obtaining from Marie-Anne's father some explanation of his singular conduct. The baron was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he failed to realize the excessive heat as he climbed the rough hillside in the full glare of the noonday sun. When he reached the summit, however, he paused to take breath; and while wiping the perspiration from his brow, turned to look back on the valley whence he had come. It was the first time he had visited the spot, and he was surprised at the extent of the landscape offered to his view. From this point, the most elevated in the surrounding country, one can survey the course of the Oiselle for many miles; and in the distance a glimpse may be obtained of the ancient citadel of Montaignac, perched on an almost inaccessible rock. A man in the baron's mood could, however, take but little interest in the picturesqueness of the scenery,

though, when he turned his back to the valley and prepared to resume his walk, he was certainly struck by the aspect of Lacheneur's new abode. His imagination pictured the sufferings of this unfortunate man, who, only two days before, had relinquished the splendors of the Chateau du Sairmeuse to resume the peasant life of his early youth.

"Come in!" cried a female voice when M. d'Escorval rapped at the door of the cottage. He lifted the latch, and entered a small room with whitewashed walls, having no other ceiling than the thatched roof, and no other flooring than the bare ground. A table with a wooden bench on either side stood in the middle of this humble chamber, in one corner of which was an old bedstead. On a stool near the narrow casement sat Marie-Anne, working at a piece of embroidery, and clad in a peasant girl's usual garb.

At the sight of M. d'Escorval, she rose to her feet, and for a moment they remained standing in front of one another, she apparently calm, he visibly agitated. Lacheneur's daughter was paler than usual, she seemed even thinner, but there was a strange, touching charm about her person; the consciousness of duty nobly fulfilled, of resignation calling for accomplishment, lending, as it were, a new radiance to her beauty.

Remembering his son, M. d'Escorval was surprised at Marie-Anne's tranquillity.

"You don't inquire after Maurice," he said, with a touch of reproachfulness in his voice.

"I had news of him this morning, as I have had every day," quietly replied Marie-Anne. "I know that he is getting better, and that he was able to take some food yesterday."

"You have not forgotten him, then?"

She trembled; a faint blush suffused her cheeks and forehead, but it was in a calm voice that she replied: "Maurice knows that it would be impossible for me to forget him, even if I wished to do so."

"And yet you told him that you approved your father's decision!"

"Yes, I told him so; and I shall have the courage to repeat it."

"But you have made Maurice most wretched and unhappy, my dear child; he almost died of grief."

She raised her head proudly, looked M. d'Escorval fully in the face and answered: "Do you think, then, that I haven't suffered myself?"

M. d'Escorval was abashed for a moment; but speedily recovering himself, he took hold of Marie-Anne's hand and, pressing it affectionately, exclaimed: "So Maurice loves you, and you love him; you are both suffering: he has nearly died of grief and still you reject him!"

"It must be so, sir."

"You say this, my dear child—you say this, and you undoubtedly believe it. But I, who have sought to discover the necessity of this immense sacrifice, have quite failed to find any plausible reason. Explain to me why it must be so, Marie-Anne. Have you no confidence in me? Am I not an old friend? It may be that your father in his despair has adopted extreme resolutions. Let me know them, and we will conquer them together. Lacheneur knows how deeply I am attached to him. I will speak to him: he will listen to *me*."

"I can tell you nothing, sir."

"What! you remain inflexible when a father entreats you to assist him, when he says to you: 'Marie-Anne, you hold my son's happiness, life, and reason in your hands. Can you be so cruel—'"

"Ah! it is you who are cruel, sir," answered Marie-Anne with tears glittering in her eyes; "it is you who are without pity. Can not you see what I suffer? No, I have nothing to tell you; there is nothing you can say to my father. Why try to unnerve me when I require all my courage to struggle against my despair? Maurice must forget me; he must never see me again. This is fate; and he must not fight against it. It would be folly. Beseech him to leave the country, and if he refuses, you, who are his father, must command him to do so. And you, too, in heaven's name fly from us. We shall bring misfortune upon you. Never return here; our house is accursed. The fate that overshadows us may ruin you as well."

She spoke almost wildly, and her voice was so loud that it reached an adjoining room, the door of which suddenly opened, M. Lacheneur appearing upon the threshold.

At the sight of M. d'Escorval the whilom lord of Sairmeuse could not restrain an oath; but there was more sorrow and anxiety than anger in his manner as he said, "What, you here, baron?"

The consternation into which Marie-Anne's words had thrown M. d'Escorval was so intense that he could only just manage to stammer a reply. "You have abandoned us entirely; I was

anxious about you. Have you forgotten your old friendship? I come to you—"

"Why did you not inform me of the honor that the baron had done me, Marie-Anne?" said Lacheneur sternly.

She tried to speak, but could not; and it was the baron who replied: "Why, I have but just arrived, my dear friend."

M. Lacheneur looked suspiciously, first at his daughter and then at the baron. His brow was overcast as he was evidently wondering what M. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne had said to each other while they were alone. Still, however great his disquietude may have been, he seemed to master it; and it was with his old-time affability of manner that he invited M. d'Escorval to follow him into the adjoining room. "It is my reception-room and study combined," he said smilingly.

This room, although much larger than the first, was, however, quite as scantily furnished, but piled up on the floor and table were a number of books and packages, which two men were busy sorting and arranging. One of these men was Chanlouineau, whom M. d'Escorval at once recognized, though he did not remember having ever seen the other one, a young fellow of twenty or thereabouts. With the latter's identity he was, however, soon made acquainted.

"This is my son, Jean," said Lacheneur. "He has changed since you last saw him ten years ago."

It was true. Fully ten years had elapsed since the baron last saw Lacheneur's son. How time flies! He had known Jean as a boy, and he now found him a man. Young Lacheneur was just in his twenty-first year, but with his haggard features and precocious beard he looked somewhat older. He was tall and well built, and his face indicated more than average intelligence. Still he did not convey a favorable impression. His restless eyes betokened a prying curiosity of mind, and his smile betrayed an unusual degree of shrewdness, amounting almost to cunning. He made a deep bow when his father introduced him; but he was evidently out of temper.

"Having no longer the means to keep Jean in Paris," resumed M. Lacheneur, "I have made him return as you see. My ruin will, perhaps, prove a blessing to him. The air of great cities is not good for a peasant's son. Fools that we are, we send our children to Paris that they may learn to rise above their fathers. But they do nothing of the kind. They think only of degrading themselves."

"Father," interrupted the young man; "father, wait at least until we are alone!"

"M. d'Escorval is not a stranger," retorted M. Lacheneur, and then turning again to the baron, he continued: "I must have wearied you by telling you again and again: 'I am pleased with my son. He has a commendable ambition; he is working faithfully and is bound to succeed!' Ah! I was a poor foolish father! The friend whom I commissioned to call on Jean and tell him to return here has enlightened me as to the truth. The model young man you see here only left the gaming-house to run to some public ball. He was in love with a wretched little ballet girl at some low theatre; and to please this creature he also went on the stage with his face painted red and white."

"It's not a crime to appear on the stage," interrupted Jean with a flushed face.

"No; but it is a crime to deceive one's father and to affect virtues one doesn't possess! Have I ever refused you money? No; and yet you have got into debt on all sides. You owe at least twenty thousand francs!"

Jean hung his head; he was evidently angry, but he feared his father.

"Twenty thousand francs!" repeated M. Lacheneur. "I had them a fortnight ago; now I haven't a sou. I can only hope to obtain this sum through the generosity of the Duc or the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The baron uttered an exclamation of surprise. He only knew of the scene at the parsonage and believed that there would be no further connection between Lacheneur and the duke's family. Lacheneur perceived M. d'Escorval's amazement, and it was with every token of sincerity and good faith that he resumed:

"What I say astonishes you. Ah! I understand why. My anger at first led me to indulge in all sorts of absurd threats. But I am calm now, and realize my injustice. What could I expect the duke to do? To make me a present of Sairmeuse? He was a trifle brusk, I confess, but that is his way; at heart he is the best of men."

"Have you seen him again?"

"No; but I have seen his son. I have even been with him to the chateau to select the articles which I desire to keep. Oh! he refused me nothing. Everything was placed at my disposal

—everything. I selected what I wanted; furniture, clothes, linen. Everything is to be brought here; and I shall be quite a great man."

"Why not seek another house? This—"

"This pleases me. Its situation suits me perfectly."

In fact, after all, thought M. d'Escorval, why should not the Sairmeuses have regretted their odious conduct? And if they had done so might not Lacheneur, in spite of indignation, agree to accept honorable conditions?

"To say that the marquis has been kind is saying too little," continued Lacheneur. "He has shown us the most delicate attentions. For example, having noticed how much Marie-Anne regrets the loss of her flowers, he has promised to send her plants to stock our small garden, and they will be renewed every month."

Like all passionate men, M. Lacheneur overdid his part. This last remark was too much; it awakened a terrible suspicion in M. d'Escorval's mind. "Good heavens!" he thought, "does this wretched man meditate some crime?" He glanced at Chanlouineau, and his anxiety increased, for on hearing Lacheneur speak of the marquis and Marie-Anne, the stalwart young farmer had turned livid.

"It is decided," resumed Lacheneur with an air of unbounded satisfaction, "that they will give me the ten thousand francs bequeathed to me by Mademoiselle Armande. Moreover, I am to fix upon such a sum as I consider a just recompense for my services. And that is not all: they have offered me the position of manager at Sairmeuse; and I was to be allowed to occupy the gamekeeper's cottage, where I lived so long. But on reflection I refused this offer. After having enjoyed a fortune which did not belong to me during so many years, I am now anxious to amass a fortune of my own."

"Would it be indiscreet in me to inquire what you intend to do?"

"Not the least in the world. I am going to turn pedler."

M. d'Escorval could not believe his ears. "Pedler?" he repeated.

"Yes, M. le Baron. Look, there is my pack in that corner."

"But that's absurd," exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "People can scarcely earn their daily bread in this way!"

"You are wrong, sir. I have considered the subject carefully; the profits are thirty per cent. And besides, there will

be three of us to sell the goods, for I shall confide one pack to my son, and another to Chanlouineau."

"What! Chanlouineau?"

"He has become my partner in the enterprise."

"And his farm—who will take care of that?"

"He will employ day laborers." And then, as if wishing to make M. d'Escorval understand that his visit had lasted quite long enough, Lacheneur began arranging such of the little packages as were intended for his own pack.

But the baron was not to be got rid of so easily, especially now that his suspicions had almost ripened into certainty. "I must speak with you alone," he said in a curt tone.

M. Lacheneur turned round. "I am very busy," he replied with evident reluctance of manner.

"I only ask for five minutes. But if you haven't the time to spare to-day, I can return to-morrow—the day after to-morrow —or any day when I can see you in private."

Lacheneur saw plainly that it would be impossible to escape this interview, so with a gesture of a man who resigns himself to a necessity, he bade his son and Chanlouineau withdraw.

They left the room, and as soon as the door had closed behind them, Lacheneur exclaimed: "I know very well, M. le Baron, the arguments you intend to advance; and the reason of your coming. You come to ask me again for Marie-Anne. I know that my refusal has nearly killed Maurice. Believe me, I have suffered cruelly at the thought; but my refusal is none the less irrevocable. There is no power in the world capable of changing my resolution. Don't ask my motives; I can not reveal them; but rest assured that they are sufficiently weighty."

"Are we not your friends?" asked M. d'Escorval.

"You—!" exclaimed Lacheneur with affectionate cordiality—"ah! you know it well!—you are the best, the only friends I have here below. I should be the greatest wretch living if I did not retain the recollection of your kindness until my eyes close in death. Yes, you are my friends, yes, I am devoted to you—and it is for that very reason that I answer your proposals with no, no, never!"

There was no longer any room for doubt. M. d'Escorval seized Lacheneur's hands, and almost crushing them in his grasp, "Unfortunate man!" he exclaimed, "what do you intend to do? Of what terrible vengeance are you dreaming?"

"I swear to you—"

"Oh! do not swear. You can not deceive a man of my age and of my experience. I divine your intentions—you hate the Sairmeuse family more mortally than ever."

"I—"

"Yes, you; and if you pretend to forget the way they treated you, it is only that they may forget it. These people have offended you too cruelly not to fear you; you understand this, and you are doing all in your power to reassure them. You accept their advances—you kneel before them—why? Because they will be more completely in your power when you have lulled their suspicions to rest; and then you can strike them more surely—"

He paused; the door of the front room opened, and Marie-Anne appeared upon the threshold. "Father," said she, "here is the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The mention of this name at such a juncture was so ominously significant that M. d'Escorval could not restrain a gesture of surprise and fear. "He dares to come here!" he thought. "What, is he not afraid the very walls will fall and crush him?"

M. Lacheneur cast a withering glance at his daughter. He suspected her of a ruse which might force him to reveal his secret; and for a second his features were distorted by a fit of passionate rage. By an effort, however, he succeeded in regaining his composure. He sprang to the door, pushed Marie-Anne aside, and, leaning out, exclaimed: "Deign to excuse me, M. le Marquis, if I take the liberty of asking you to wait a moment; I am just finishing some business, and I will be with you in a few minutes."

Neither agitation nor anger could be detected in his voice; but rather, a respectful deference and a feeling of profound gratitude. Having spoken in this fashion, he closed the door again and turned to M. d'Escorval. The baron, still standing with folded arms, had witnessed this scene with the air of a man who distrusts the evidence of his own senses; and yet he understood the meaning of the incident only too well. "So this young man comes here?" he said to Lacheneur.

"Almost every day—not at this hour usually, but a trifle later."

"And you receive him? you welcome him?"

"Certainly. How can I be insensible to the honor he confers upon me? Moreover, we have subjects of mutual interest to

discuss. We are now occupied in legalizing the restitution of Sairmeuse. I can also give him much useful information, and many hints regarding the management of the property."

"And do you expect to make me, your old friend, believe that a man of your superior intelligence is deceived by the excuses the marquis makes for these frequent visits? Look me in the eye, and then tell me, if you dare, that you believe these visits are addressed to you!"

Lacheneur's glance did not waver. "To whom else could they be addressed?" he inquired.

This obstinate serenity disappointed the baron's expectations. He could not have received a heavier blow. "Take care, Lacheneur," he said sternly. "Think of the situation in which you place your daughter, between Chanlouineau, who wishes to make her his wife, and M. de Sairmeuse, who hopes to make her—"

"Who hopes to make her his mistress—is that what you mean? Oh, say the word. But what does that matter? I am sure of Marie-Anne."

M. d'Escorval shuddered. "In other words," said he, in bitter indignation, "you make your daughter's honor and reputation your stake in the game you are playing."

This was too much. Lacheneur could restrain his furious passion no longer. "Well, yes!" he exclaimed, with a frightful oath; "yes, you have spoken the truth. Marie-Anne must be, and will be, the instrument of my plans. A man in my situation is free from the considerations by which others are guided. Fortune, friends, life, honor—I have been forced to sacrifice everything. Perish my daughter's virtue—perish my daughter herself—what do they signify if I can but succeed?"

Never had M. d'Escorval seen Lacheneur so excited. His eyes flashed, and as he spoke, he shook his clenched fist wildly in the air, as though he were threatening some miserable enemy. "So you admit it," exclaimed M. d'Escorval; "you admit that you propose revenging yourself on the Sairmeuse family, and that Chanlouineau is to be your accomplice?"

"I admit nothing," Lacheneur replied. "Let me reassure you." Then raising his hand as if to take an oath, he added in a solemn voice: "Before God, who hears my word, by all that I hold sacred in this world, by the memory of the wife I loved and whom I mourn to-day, I swear to you, that I am plotting nothing against the Sairmeuse family; that I have no

thought of touching a hair of their heads. I use them only because they are absolutely indispensable to me. They will aid me without injuring themselves."

For a moment the baron remained silent. He was evidently trying to reconcile Lacheneur's conflicting utterances. "How can one believe this assurance after your previous avowal?" he inquired.

"Oh, you may refuse to believe me if you choose," rejoined Lacheneur, who had now regained all his self-possession. "But whether you believe me or not, I must decline to speak any further on the subject. I have said too much already. I know that your visit and your questions have been solely prompted by your friendship, and I can not help feeling both proud and grateful. Still I can tell you no more. The events of the last few days demand that we should separate. Our paths in life lie far apart, and I can only say to you what I said yesterday to the Abbe Midon. If you are my friend never come here again under any pretext whatever. Even if you hear I am dying, do not come, and should you meet me, turn aside, shun me as you would some deadly pestilence."

Lacheneur paused, as if expecting some further observation from the baron, but the latter remained silent, reflecting that the words he had just heard were substantially a repetition of what Marie-Anne had previously told him.

"There is still a wiser course you might pursue," resumed the ex-lord of Sairmeuse, after a brief interval. "Here in the district there is but little chance of your son's sorrow soon subsiding. Turn which way he will—alas, I know myself that even the very trees and flowers will remind him of a happier time. So leave this neighborhood, take him with you, and go far away."

"Ah! how can I do that when Fouche has virtually imprisoned me here!"

"All the more reason why you should listen to my advice. You were one of the emperor's friends, hence you are regarded with suspicion. You are surrounded by spies, and your enemies are watching for an opportunity to ruin you. They would seize on the slightest pretext to throw you into prison—a letter, a word, an act capable of misconstruction. The frontier is not far off; so I repeat, go and wait in a foreign land for happier times."

"That I will never do," said M. d'Escorval proudly, his

words and accent showing plainly enough how futile further discussion would be.

"Ah! you are like the Abbe Midon," sadly rejoined Lacheneur; "you won't believe me. Who knows how much your coming here this morning may cost you? It is said that no one can escape his destiny. But if some day the executioner lays his hand on your shoulder, remember that I warned you, and don't curse me for what may happen."

Lacheneur paused once more, and seeing that even this sinister prophecy produced no impression on the baron, he pressed his hand as if to bid him an eternal farewell, and opened the door to admit the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Martial was, perhaps, annoyed at meeting M. d'Escorval; but he nevertheless bowed with studied politeness, and began a lively conversation with M. Lacheneur, telling him that the articles he had selected at the chateau were at that moment on their way.

M. d'Escorval could do no more. It was quite impossible for him to speak with Marie-Anne, over whom Chanlouineau and Jean were both jealously mounting guard. Accordingly, he reluctantly took his leave, and oppressed by cruel forebodings, slowly descended the hill which he had climbed an hour before so full of hope.

What should he say to Maurice? He was revolving this query in his mind and had just reached the little pine grove skirting the waste, when the sound of hurried footsteps behind induced him to look back. Perceiving to his great surprise that the young Marquis de Sairmeuse was approaching and motioning him to stop, the baron paused, wondering what Martial could possibly want of him.

The latter's features wore a most ingenuous air, as he hastily raised his hat and exclaimed: "I hope, sir, that you will excuse me for having followed you when you hear what I have to say. I do not belong to your party and our doctrines and preferences are very different. Still I have none of your enemies' passion and malice. For this reason I tell you that if I were in your place I would take a journey abroad. The frontier is but a few miles off; a good horse, a short gallop, and you have crossed it. A word to the wise is—salvation!"

Having thus spoken and without waiting for any reply, Martial abruptly turned and retraced his steps.

"One might suppose there was a conspiracy to drive me away!" murmured M. d'Escorval in his amazement. "But I

have good reason to distrust this young man's disinterestedness. The young marquis was already far off. Had he been less preoccupied, he would have perceived two figures in the grove—Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu, followed by the inevitable Aunt Medea, had come to play the spy.

X

THE Marquis de Courtornieu idolized his daughter. This was alike an incontestable and an uncontested fact. When people spoke to him concerning the young lady they invariably exclaimed: "You who adore your daughter—" And in a like manner whenever the marquis spoke of her himself, he always contrived to say: "I who adore Blanche." In point of fact, however, he would have given a good deal, even a third of his fortune, to get rid of this smiling, seemingly artless girl, who, despite her apparent simplicity, had proved more than a match for him with all his diplomatic experience. Her fancies were legion, and however capricious they chanced to be it was useless to resist them. At one time he had hoped to ward his daughter off by inviting Aunt Medea to come and live at the chateau, but the weak-minded spinster had proved a most fragile barrier, and soon Blanche had returned to the charge more audacious and capricious than ever. Sometimes the marquis revolted, but nine times out of ten he paid dearly for his attempts at rebellion. When Blanche turned her cold, steel-like eyes upon him with a certain peculiar expression, his courage evaporated. Her weapon was irony; and knowing his weak points she dealt her blows with wonderful precision.

Such being the position of affairs, it is easy to understand how devoutly M. de Courtornieu prayed and hoped that some eligible young aristocrat would ask for his daughter's hand, and thus free him from bondage. He had announced on every side that he intended to give her a dowry of a million francs, a declaration which had brought a host of eager suitors to Courtornieu. But, unfortunately, though many of these wooers would have suited the marquis well enough, not one had been

so fortunate as to please the capricious Blanche. Her father presented a candidate; she received him graciously, lavished all her charms upon him; but as soon as his back was turned, she disappointed all her father's hopes by rejecting him. "He is too short, or too tall. His rank is not equal to ours. He is a fool—his nose is so ugly." Such were the reasons she would give for her refusal; and from these summary decisions there was no appeal. Arguments and persuasions were alike useless. The condemned man had only to take himself off and be forgotten.

Still, as this inspection of would-be husbands amused the capricious Blanche, she encouraged her father in his efforts to find a suitor. Despite all his perseverance, however, to please her, the poor marquis was beginning to despair, when fate dropped the Duc de Sairmeuse and his son at his very door. At sight of Martial he had a presentiment that the *rara avis* he was seeking was found at last; and believing it best to strike the iron while it was hot, he broached the subject to the duke on the morrow of their first meeting. M. de Courtornieu's overtures were favorably received, and the matter was soon decided. Indeed, having the desire to transform Sairmeuse into a principality, the duke could not fail to be delighted with an alliance with one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the neighborhood. "Martial, my son," he said, "possesses in his own right an income of at least six hundred thousand francs."

"I shall give my daughter a dowry of at least—yes, at least fifteen hundred thousand," replied M. de Courtornieu.

"His majesty is favorably disposed toward me," resumed his grace. "I can obtain any important diplomatic position for Martial."

"In case of trouble," was the retort, "I have many friends among the opposition."

The treaty was thus concluded; but M. de Courtornieu took good care not to speak of it to his daughter. If he told her how much he desired the match, she would be sure to oppose it. Non-intervention accordingly seemed advisable. The correctness of his policy was soon fully demonstrated. One morning Blanche entered her father's study and peremptorily declared: "Your capricious daughter has decided, papa, that she would like to become the Marquise de Sairmeuse."

It cost M. de Courtornieu quite an effort to conceal his delight; but he feared that if Blanche discovered his satisfaction

the game would be lost. Accordingly, he presented several objections, which were quickly disposed of; and, at last, he ventured to opine: "Then the marriage is half decided, as one of the parties consents. It only remains to ascertain if—"

"The other will consent," retorted the vain heiress; who, it should be remarked, had for several days previously been assiduously engaged in the agreeable task of fascinating Martial and bringing him to her feet. With a skilful affectation of simplicity and frankness, she had allowed the young marquis to perceive that she enjoyed his society, and without being absolutely forward she had made him evident advances. Now, however, the time had come to beat a retreat—a maneuvre so successfully practised by coquettes, and which usually suffices to enslave even a hesitating suitor. Hitherto, Blanche had been gay, spirituelle, and coquettish; now she gradually grew quiet and reserved. The giddy schoolgirl had given place to a shrinking maiden; and it was with rare perfection that she played her part in the divine comedy of "first love." Martial could not fail to be fascinated by the modest timidity and chaste fears of a virgin heart now awaking under his influence to a consciousness of the tender passion. Whenever he made his appearance Blanche blushed and remained silent. Directly he spoke she grew confused; and he could only occasionally catch a glimpse of her beautiful eyes behind the shelter of their long lashes. Who could have taught her this refinement of coquetry? Strange as it may seem, she had acquired her acquaintance with all the artifices of love during her convent education.

One thing she had not learned, however, that clever as one may be, one is ofttimes duped by one's own imagination. Great actresses so enter into the spirit of their part that they frequently end by shedding real tears. This knowledge came to Blanche one evening when a bantering remark from the Duc de Sairmeuse apprised her of the fact that Martial was in the habit of going to Lacheneur's house every day. She had previously been annoyed at the young marquis's admiration of Marie-Anne, but now she experienced a feeling of real jealousy; and her sufferings were so intolerable that, fearing she might reveal them, she hurriedly left the drawing-room and hastened to her own room.

"Can it be that he does not love me?" she murmured. She shivered at the thought; and for the first time in her life this

haughty heiress distrusted her own power. She reflected that Martial's position was so exalted that he could afford to despise rank; that he was so rich that wealth had no attractions for him; and that she herself might not be so pretty and so charming as her flatterers had led her to suppose. Still Martial's conduct during the past week—and heaven knows with what fidelity her memory recalled each incident!—was well calculated to reassure her. He had not, it is true, formally declared himself; but it was evident that he was paying his addresses to her. His manner was that of the most respectful, but the most infatuated, of lovers.

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of her maid bringing a large bouquet of roses which Martial had just sent. She took the flowers, and, while arranging them in a vase, bedewed them with the first sincere tears she had shed since she was a child.

She was so pale and sad, so unlike herself when she appeared the next morning at breakfast, that Aunt Medea felt alarmed. But Blanche had prepared an excuse, which she presented in such sweet tones that the old lady was as much amazed as if she had witnessed a miracle. M. de Courtornieu was no less astonished, and wondered what new freak it was that his daughter's doleful face betokened. He was still more alarmed when immediately after breakfast Blanche asked to speak with him.

She followed him into his study, and as soon as they were alone, before he had even had time to sit down, she entreated him to tell her what had passed between the Duc de Sairmeuse and himself; she wished to know if Martial had been informed of the intended alliance, and what he had replied. Her voice was meek, her eyes tearful; and her manner indicated the most intense anxiety.

The marquis was delighted. "My wilful daughter has been playing with fire," he thought, stroking his chin caressingly; "and upon my word she has scorched herself." Then with a smile on his face he added aloud: "Yesterday, my child, the Duc de Sairmeuse formally asked for your hand on his son's behalf; and your consent is all that is lacking. So rest easy, my beautiful lovelorn damsel—you will be a duchess."

She hid her face in her hands to conceal her blushes. "You know my decision, father," she faltered in an almost inaudible voice; "we must make haste."

He started back, thinking he had not heard her words aright. "Make haste!" he repeated.

"Yes, father. I have fears."

"What fears, in heaven's name?"

"I will tell you when everything is settled," she replied, at the same time making her escape from the room.

She did not doubt the reports which had reached her concerning Martial's frequent visits to Marie-Anne, still she wished to ascertain the truth for herself. Accordingly, on leaving her father, she told Aunt Medea to dress herself, and without vouchsafing a single word of explanation, took her with her to the Reche and stationed herself in the pine grove, so as to command a view of M. Lacheneur's cottage.

It chanced to be the very day when M. d'Escorval called on Marie-Anne's father, in hopes of obtaining some definite explanation of his conduct. Blanche saw the baron climb the slope, and shortly afterward Martial followed the same route. She had been rightly informed; there was no room for further doubt, and her first impulse was to return home. But on reflection she resolved to wait and ascertain how long the marquis remained with this girl she hated. M. d'Escorval's visit was a brief one, and scarcely had he left the cottage than she saw Martial hasten out after him, and speak to him. She breathed again.

The marquis had only made a brief call, perhaps on some matter of business, and no doubt, like M. d'Escorval, he was now going home again. Not at all, however; after a moment's conversation with the baron, Martial returned to the cottage.

"What are we doing here?" asked Aunt Medea.

"Let me alone! hold your tongue!" angrily replied Blanche, whose attention had just been attracted by a rumble of wheels, a tramp of horse's hoofs, a loud cracking of whips, and a brisk exchange of oaths, such as wagoners in a difficulty usually resort to.

All this racket heralded the approach of the vehicles conveying M. Lacheneur's furniture and clothes. The noise must have reached the cottage on the slope, for Martial speedily appeared on the threshold, followed by Lacheneur, Jean, Chanlouineau, and Marie-Anne. Every one was soon busy unloading the wagons, and, judging from the young marquis's gestures and manner, it seemed as if he were directing the operation. He was certainly bestirring himself immensely. Hurrying to

and fro, talking to everybody, and at times not even disdaining to lend a hand.

"He, a nobleman makes himself at home in that wretched hovel!" quoth Blanche to herself. "How horrible! Ah! I see only too well that this dangerous creature can do what she likes with him."

All this, however, was nothing compared with what was to come. A third cart drawn by a single horse, and laden with shrubs and pots of flowers, soon halted in front of the cottage. At this sight Blanche was positively enraged. "Flowers!" she exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with passion. "He sends her flowers, as he does me—only he sends me a bouquet, while for her he pillages the gardens of Sairmeuse."

"What are you saying about flowers?" inquired the impoverished relative.

Blanche curtly rejoined that she had not made the slightest allusion to flowers. She was suffocating; and yet she obstinately refused to leave the grove and go home as Aunt Medea repeatedly suggested. No; she must see the finish, and although a couple of hours were spent in unloading the furniture, still she lingered, with her eyes fixed on the cottage and its surroundings. Some time after the empty wagons had gone off, Martial reappeared on the threshold; Marie-Anne was with him, and they remained talking, in full view of the grove where Blanche and her chaperone were concealed. For a long while it seemed as if the young marquis could not promptly make up his mind to leave, and, when he did so, it was with evident reluctance that he slowly walked away. Marie-Anne still standing on the doorstep waved her hand after him with a friendly gesture of farewell.

The young marquis was scarcely out of sight when Blanche turned to her aunt and hurriedly exclaimed: "I must speak to that creature; come quick!" Had Marie-Anne been within speaking distance at that moment, she would certainly have learned the cause of her former friend's anger and hatred. But fate willed it otherwise. Three hundred yards of rough ground intervened between the two; and in crossing this space Blanche had time enough to reflect.

She soon bitterly regretted having shown herself at all. But Marie-Anne, who was still standing on the threshold of the cottage, had seen her approaching, and it was consequently quite impossible to retreat. She accordingly utilized the few

moments still at her disposal in recovering her self-control and composing her features; and she had her sweetest smile on her lips when she greeted the girl whom she had styled "that creature" only a few minutes previously. Still she was embarrassed, scarcely knowing what excuse to give for her visit, hence, with the view of gaining time, she pretended to be quite out of breath. "Ah! it is not very easy to reach you, dear Marie-Anne," she said at last; "you live on the top of a perfect mountain."

Mademoiselle Lacheneur did not reply. She was greatly surprised, and did not attempt to conceal the fact.

"Aunt Medea pretended to know the road," continued Blanche; "but she led me astray. Didn't you, aunt?"

As usual the impecunious relative assented, and her niece resumed: "But at last we are here. I couldn't resign myself to hearing nothing about you, my dear, especially after all your misfortunes. What have you been doing? Did my recommendation procure you the work you wanted?"

Marie-Anne was deeply touched by the kindly interest which her former friend displayed in her welfare, and with perfect frankness she confessed that all her efforts had been fruitless. It had even seemed to her that several ladies had taken pleasure in treating her unkindly.

Blanche was not listening, however. Close by stood the flowers brought from Sairmeuse; and their perfume rekindled her anger. "At all events," she interrupted, "you have something here which will almost make you forget the gardens of Sairmeuse. Who sent you those beautiful flowers?"

Marie-Anne turned crimson. For a moment she did not speak, but at last she stammered: "They are a mark of attention from the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"So she confesses it!" thought Mademoiselle de Courtornieu, amazed at what she was pleased to consider an outrageous piece of impudence. But she succeeded in concealing her rage beneath a loud burst of laughter; and it was in a tone of raillery that she rejoined: "Take care, my dear friend, I am going to call you to account. You are accepting flowers from my *fiance*."

"What, the Marquis de Sairmeuse!"

"Yes, he has asked for my hand; and my father has promised it to him. It is a secret as yet; but I see no danger in confiding in your friendship."

Blanche really believed that this information would crush her rival; but though she watched her closely, she failed to detect the slightest trace of emotion in her face. "What dissimulation!" thought the heiress, and then with affected gaiety, she resumed aloud: "And the country folks will see two weddings at about the same time, since you are going to be married as well, my dear."

"I married?"

"Yes, you—you little deceiver! Everybody knows that you are engaged to a young man in the neighborhood, named—wait, I know—Chanlouineau."

Thus the report which annoyed Marie-Anne so much reached her from every side. "Everybody is for once mistaken," she replied energetically. "I shall never be that young man's wife."

"But why? People speak well of him personally, and he is very well off."

"Because," faltered Marie-Anne; "because—" Maurice d'Escorval's name trembled on her lips; but unfortunately she did not give it utterance. She was as it were abashed by a strange expression on Blanche's face. How often one's destiny depends on such an apparently trivial circumstance as this!

"What an impudent, worthless creature!" thought Blanche; and then in cold, sneering tones that unmistakably betrayed her hatred, she said: "You are wrong, believe me, to refuse such an offer. This young fellow Chanlouineau will at all events save you from the painful necessity of toiling with your own hands, and of going from door to door in quest of work which is refused you. But no matter; *I*"—she laid great stress upon this word—"*I* will be more generous than your other old acquaintances. I have a great deal of embroidery to be done. I shall send it to you by my maid, and you two may settle the price together. It's late now, and we must go. Good-by, my dear. Come, Aunt Medea."

So saying, the haughty heiress turned away, leaving Marie-Anne petrified with surprise, sorrow, and indignation. Although less experienced than Blanche, she understood well enough that this strange visit concealed some mystery—but what? She stood motionless, gazing after her departing visitors, when she felt a hand laid gently on her shoulder. She trembled, and turning quickly found herself face to face with her father.

Lacheneur was intensely pale and agitated, and a sinister

light glittered in his eyes. "I was there," said he, pointing to the door, "and I heard everything."

"Father!"

"What! would you try to defend her after she came here to crush you with her insolent good fortune—after she overwhelmed you with her ironical pity and scorn! I tell you they are all like this—these girls, whose heads have been turned by flattery, and who believe that the blood in their veins is different to ours. But patience! The day of reckoning is near at hand!"

He paused. Those whom he threatened would have trembled had they seen him at that moment, so plain it was that he harbored in his mind some terrible design of retributive vengeance.

"And you, my darling, my poor Marie-Anne," he continued, "you did not understand the insults she heaped upon you. You are wondering why she treated you with such disdain. Ah, well! I will tell you: she imagines that the Marquis de Sairmeuse is your lover."

Marie-Anne turned as pale as her father, and quivered from head to foot. "Can it be possible?" she exclaimed. "Great God! what shame! what humiliation!"

"Why should it astonish you?" said Lacheneur, coldly. "Haven't you expected this result ever since the day when, to ensure the success of my plans, you consented to receive the attentions of this marquis, whom you loathe as much as I despise?"

"But Maurice! Maurice will despise me! I can bear anything, yes, everything but that."

Lacheneur made no reply. Marie-Anne's despair was heart-rending; he felt that he could not bear to witness it, that it would shake his resolution, and accordingly he reentered the house.

His penetration was not at fault, in surmising that Blanche's visit would lead to something new, for biding the time when she might fully revenge herself in a way worthy of her hatred, Mademoiselle de Courtornieu availed herself of a favorite weapon among the jealous—calumny—and two or three abominable stories which she concocted, and which she induced Aunt Medea to circulate in the neighborhood, virtually ruined Marie-Anne's reputation.

These scandalous reports even came to Martial's ears, but Blanche was greatly mistaken if she had imagined that they

would induce him to cease his visits to Lacheneur's cottage. He went there more frequently than ever and stayed much longer than he had been in the habit of doing before. Dissatisfied with the progress of his courtship, and fearful that he was being duped, he even watched the house. And then one evening, when the young marquis was quite sure that Lacheneur, his son, and Chanlouineau were absent, it so happened that he perceived a man leave the cottage, descend the slope and hasten across the fields. He followed in pursuit, but the fugitive escaped him. He believed, however, that he had recognized Maurice d'Escorval.

XI

WHEN Maurice narrated to his father the various incidents which had marked his interview with Marie-Anne in the pine grove near La Reche, M. d'Escorval was prudent enough to make no allusion to the hopes of final victory which he himself still entertained. "My poor Maurice," he thought, "is heart-broken, but resigned. It is better for him to remain without hope than to be exposed to the danger of another possible disappointment."

But passion is not always blind, and Maurice divined what the baron tried to conceal—and clung to this faint hope in his father's intervention as tenaciously as a drowning man clings to the proverbial straw. If he refrained from speaking on the subject, it was only because he felt convinced that his parents would not tell him the truth. Still he watched all that went on in the house with that subtlety of penetration which fever so often imparts, and nothing that his father said or did escaped his vigilant eyes and ears. He heard the baron put on his boots, ask for his hat, and select a cane from among those placed in the hall stand; and a moment later he, moreover, heard the garden gate grate upon its hinges. Plainly enough M. d'Escorval was going out. Weak as he was, Maurice succeeded in dragging himself to the window in time to ascertain the truth of his surmise. "If my father is going out," he

thought, "it can only be to visit M. Lacheneur; and if he is going to La Reche he has evidently not relinquished all hope."

With this thought in his mind Maurice sank into an armchair close at hand, intending to watch for his father's return; by doing so, he might know his fate a few moments sooner. Three long hours elapsed before the baron returned, and by his dejected manner Maurice plainly saw that all hope was lost. Of this he was sure, as sure as the criminal who reads the fatal verdict in the judge's solemn face. He required all his energy to regain his couch, and for a moment he felt that he should die. Soon, however, he grew ashamed of this weakness, which he judged unworthy of him, and prompted by a desire to know exactly what had happened he rang the bell, and told the servant who answered his summons that he wished to speak with his father. M. d'Escorval promptly made his appearance.

"Well!" exclaimed Maurice, as his father crossed the threshold of the room.

The baron felt that all denial would be useless. "Lacheneur is deaf to my remonstrances and entreaties," he replied, sadly. "There is no hope, my poor boy; you must submit. I will not tell you that time will assuage the sorrow that now seems insupportable—for you wouldn't believe me if I did. But I do say to you be a man, and prove your courage. I will say even more: fight against all thought of Marie-Anne as a traveler on the brink of a precipice fights against the thought of vertigo."

"Have you seen Marie-Anne, father? Have you spoken to her?"

"I found her even more inflexible than Lacheneur."

"They reject me, and yet no doubt they receive Chanlouineau."

"Chanlouineau is living there."

"Good heavens! And Martial de Sairmeuse?"

"He is their familiar guest. I saw him there."

Evidently enough each of these replies fell upon Maurice like a thunderbolt. But M. d'Escorval had armed himself with the imperturbable courage of a surgeon, who only grasps his instrument more firmly when the patient groans and writhes beneath his touch. He felt that it was necessary to extinguish the last ray of hope in his son's heart.

"It is evident that M. Lacheneur has lost his reason!" exclaimed Maurice.

The baron shook his head despondently. "I thought so myself at first," he murmured.

"But what does he say in justification of his conduct? He must say something."

"Nothing: he refuses any explanation."

"And you, father, with all your knowledge of human nature, with all your wide experience, have not been able to fathom his intentions?"

"I have my suspicions," M. d'Escorval replied; "but only suspicions. It is possible that Lacheneur, listening to the voice of hatred, is dreaming of some terrible revenge. He may, perhaps, think of organizing some conspiracy against the *emigres*. Such a supposition would explain everything. Chanlouineau would be his aider and abettor; and he pretends to be reconciled to the Marquis de Sairmeuse in order to obtain information through him—"

The blood had returned to Maurice's pale cheeks. "Such a conspiracy," said he, "would not explain M. Lacheneur's obstinate rejection of my suit."

"Alas! yes, it would, my poor boy. It is through Marie-Anne that Lacheneur exerts such great influence over Chanlouineau and the marquis. If she became your wife to-day, they would desert him to-morrow. Then, too, it is precisely because he has such sincere regard for us that he is determined to keep us out of a hazardous, even perilous, enterprise. However, of course, this is merely a conjecture."

"Still, I see that it is necessary to submit," faltered Maurice. "I must resign myself; forget, I can not."

He said this because he wished to reassure his father; though, in reality, he thought exactly the reverse. "If Lacheneur is organizing a conspiracy," he murmured to himself, "he must need assistance. Why should I not offer mine? If I aid him in his preparations, if I share his hopes and dangers, he can not refuse me his daughter's hand. Whatever he may wish to undertake, I can surely be of greater assistance to him than Chanlouineau."

From that moment Maurice dwelt upon this thought; and the result was that he no longer pined and fretted, but did all he could to hasten his convalescence. This passed so rapidly that the Abbe Midon, who had taken the place of the physician from Montaignac, was positively astonished. Madame d'Escorval was delighted at her son's wonderful improvement in health

and spirits, and declared that she would never have believed he could be so soon and so easily consoled. The baron did not try to diminish his wife's satisfaction, though he regarded this almost miraculous recovery with considerable distrust, having, indeed, a vague perception of the truth. Skilfully, however, as he questioned his son he could draw nothing from him; for Maurice had decided to keep whatever determinations he had formed a secret even from his parents. What good would it do to trouble them? and, besides, he feared remonstrance and opposition; which he was anxious to avoid, although firmly resolved to carry out his plans, even if he were compelled to leave the paternal roof.

One day in the second week of September the abbe declared that Maurice might resume his ordinary life, and that, as the weather was pleasant it would be well for him to spend much of his time in the open air. In his delight, Maurice embraced the worthy priest, at the same time remarking that he had felt afraid the shooting season would pass by without his bagging a single bird. In reality he cared but little for a day on the cover; the partiality he feigned being prompted by the idea that "shooting" would furnish him with an excuse for frequent and protracted absences from home.

He had never felt happier than he did the morning when, with his gun over his shoulder, he crossed the Oiselle and started for M. Lacheneur's cottage at La Reche. He had just reached the little pine grove, and was about to pause, when he perceived Jean Lacheneur and Chanlouineau leave the house, each laden with a pedler's pack. This circumstance delighted him, as he might now expect to find M. Lacheneur and Marie-Anne alone in the cottage.

He hastened up the slope and lifted the door latch without pausing to rap. Marie-Anne and her father were kneeling on the hearth in front of a blazing fire.

On hearing the door open, they turned; and at the sight of Maurice, they both sprang to their feet, Lacheneur with a composed look on his face, and Marie-Anne blushing to the roots of her hair. "What brings you here?" they exclaimed in the same breath.

Under other circumstances, Maurice d'Escorval would have been dismayed by such an unengaging greeting, but now he scarcely noticed it.

"You have no business to return here against my wishes, and

after what I said to you, M. d'Escorval," exclaimed Lacheneur, rudely.

Maurice smiled, he was perfectly cool, and not a detail of the scene before him had escaped his notice. If he had felt any doubts before, they were now dispelled. On the fire he saw a large caldron of molten lead, while several bullet-molds stood on the hearth, beside the andirons.

"If, sir, I venture to present myself at your house," said young D'Escorval in a grave, impressive voice, "it is because I know everything. I have discovered your revengeful projects. You are looking for men to aid you, are you not? Very well! look me in the face, in the eyes, and tell me if I am not one of those a leader is glad to enroll among his followers?"

Lacheneur seemed terribly agitated. "I don't know what you mean," he faltered, forgetting his feigned anger; "I have no such projects as you suppose."

"Would you assert this upon oath? If so, why are you casting those bullets? You are clumsy conspirators. You should lock your door; some one else might have opened it." And adding example to precept, he turned and pushed the bolt. "This is only an imprudence," he continued: "but to reject a willing volunteer would be a mistake for which your associates would have a right to call you to account. Pray understand that I have no desire to force myself into your confidence. Whatever your cause may be, I declare it mine; whatever you wish, I wish; I adopt your plans; your enemies are my enemies; command me and I will obey you. I only ask one favor, that of fighting, conquering, or dying by your side."

"Oh! father, refuse him!" exclaimed Marie-Anne, "refuse him! It would be a crime to accept his offer."

"A crime! And why, if you please?" asked Maurice.

"Because our cause is not your cause; because its success is doubtful; because dangers surround us on every side."

Maurice interrupted her with a cry of scorn. "And you think to dissuade me," said he, "by warning me of the dangers which you, a girl, can yet afford to brave. You can not think me a coward! If peril threatens you, all the more reason to accept my aid. Would you desert me if I were menaced, would you hide yourself, saying: 'Let him perish, so that I be saved!' Speak! would you do this?"

Marie-Anne averted her face and made no reply. She could not force herself to utter an untruth; and, on the other hand,

she was unwilling to answer: "I would act as you are acting." She prudently waited for her father's decision.

"If I complied with your request, Maurice," said M. Lacheneur, "in less than three days you would curse me, and ruin us by some outburst of anger. Loving Marie-Anne as you do, you could not behold her equivocal position unmoved. Remember, she must neither discourage Chanlouineau nor the marquis. I know as well as you do that the part is a shameful one; and that it must result in the loss of a girl's most precious possession—her reputation; still, to ensure our success, it must be so."

Maurice did not wince. "So be it," he said calmly. "Marie-Anne's fate will be that of all women who have devoted themselves to the political cause of the man they love, be he father, brother, or lover. She will be slandered and insulted, and still what does it matter! Let her continue her task. I consent to it, for I shall never doubt her, and I shall know how to hold my peace. If we succeed, she shall be my wife, if we fail—" The gesture with which young D'Escorval concluded his sentence expressed more strongly than any verbal protestations that come what might he was ready and resigned.

Lacheneur seemed deeply moved. "At least give me time for reflection," said he.

"There is no necessity, sir, for further reflection."

"But you are only a child, Maurice; and your father is my friend."

"What of that?"

"Rash boy! don't you understand that by compromising yourself you also compromise the Baron d'Escorval? You think you are only risking your own head, but you are also endangering your father's life—"

"Oh, there has been too much parleying already!" interrupted Maurice, "there have been too many remonstrances. Answer me in a word! Only understand this: if you refuse, I shall immediately return home and blow out my brains."

It was plain from the young man's manner that this was no idle threat. The strange fire gleaming in his eyes, and the impressive tone of his voice, convinced both his listeners that he really intended to effect his deadly purpose; and Marie-Anne, with a heart full of cruel apprehensions, clasped her hands and turned to her father with a pleading look.

"You are one of us, then," sternly exclaimed Lacheneur after a brief pause; "but do not forget that your threats alone in-

duced me to consent; and whatever may happen to you or yours, remember that you would have it so."

These gloomy words, ominous as they were, produced, however, no impression upon Maurice, who, feverish with anxiety a moment before, was now well-nigh delirious with joy.

"At present," continued Lacheneur, "I must tell you my hopes, and acquaint you with the cause for which I am toiling—"

"What does that matter to me?" replied Maurice gaily; and springing toward Marie-Anne he seized her hand and raised it to his lips, crying, with the joyous laugh of youth: "Here is my cause—none other!"

Lacheneur turned aside. Perhaps he remembered that a sacrifice of his own obstinate pride would suffice to assure his daughter's and her lover's happiness.

Still if a feeling of remorse crept into his mind, he swiftly banished it, and with increased sternness of manner exclaimed: "It is necessary, however, that you should understand our agreement."

"Let me know your conditions, sir," said Maurice.

"First of all, your visits here—after certain rumors that I have circulated—would arouse suspicion. You must only come here at night-time, and then only at hours agreed upon in advance—never when you are not expected." Lacheneur paused, and then seeing that Maurice's attitude implied unreserved consent, he added: "You must also find some way to cross the river without employing the ferryman, who is a dangerous fellow."

"We have an old skiff; I will persuade my father to have it repaired."

"Very well. Will you also promise me to avoid the Marquis de Sairmeuse?"

"I will."

"Wait a moment—we must be prepared for any emergency. Perhaps in spite of our precautions you may meet him here. M. de Sairmeuse is arrogance itself; and he hates you. You detest him, and you are very hasty. Swear to me that if he provokes you, you will ignore his insults."

"But I should be considered a coward."

"Probably; but will you swear?"

Maurice was hesitating when an imploring look from Marie-Anne decided him. "I swear it!" he said gravely.

"As far as Chanlouineau is concerned, it would be better not to let him know of our agreement; but I will see to that point myself." Lacheneur paused once more and reflected for a moment whether he had left anything forgotten. "All that remains, Maurice," he soon resumed, "is to give you a last and very important piece of advice. Do you know my son?"

"Certainly; we were formerly the best of friends when we met during the holidays."

"Very well. When you know my secret—for I shall confide it to you without reserve—beware of Jean."

"What, sir?"

"Beware of Jean. I repeat it." And Lacheneur's face flushed as he added: "Ah! it is a painful avowal for a father; but I have no confidence in my own son. He knows no more of my plans than I told him on the day of his arrival. I deceive him, because I fear he might betray us. Perhaps it would be wise to send him away; but in that case, what would people say? Most assuredly they would say that I wanted to save my own blood, while I was ready to risk the lives of others. Still I may be mistaken; I may misjudge him." He sighed, and again added: "Beware!"

It will be understood from the foregoing that it was really Maurice d'Escorval whom the Marquis de Sairmeuse perceived leaving Lacheneur's cottage on the night he played the spy. Martial was not positively certain of the fugitive's identity, but the very idea made his heart swell with anger. "What part am I playing here, then?" he exclaimed indignantly.

Passion had hitherto so completely blinded him that even if no pains had been taken to deceive him, he would probably have remained in blissful ignorance of the true condition of affairs. He fully believed in the sincerity of Lacheneur's formal courtesy and politeness and of Jean's studied respect, while Chanlouineau's almost servile obsequiousness did not surprise him in the least. And since Marie-Anne welcomed him cordially he had concluded that his suit was favorably progressing. Having himself forgotten the incidents which marked the return of his family to Sairmeuse, he concluded that every one else had ceased to remember them. Moreover, he was of opinion that he had acted with great generosity, and that he was fully entitled to the gratitude of the Lacheneurs; for Marie-Anne's father had received the legacy bequeathed him by Mademoiselle Armande, with an indemnity for his past ser-

vices; and in addition he had selected whatever furniture he pleased among the appointments of the chateau. In goods and coin he had been presented with quite sixty thousand francs; and the hard-fisted old duke, enraged at such prodigality, although it did not cost him a penny, had discontentedly growled:

"He must be hard to please indeed if he is not satisfied with what we've done for him."

Such being the position of affairs, and having for so long supposed that he was the only visitor to the cottage on La Reche, Martial was perfectly incensed when he discovered that such was not the case. Was he, after all, merely a shameless girl's foolish dupe? So great was his anger that for more than a week he did not go to Lacheneur's house. His father concluded that his ill-humor was caused by some misunderstanding with Marie-Anne; and he took advantage of this opportunity to obtain his son's consent to a marriage with Blanche de Courtornieu. Goaded to the last extremity, tortured by doubt and fear, the young marquis eventually agreed to his father's proposals; and, naturally enough, the duke did not allow such a good resolution to grow cold. In less than forty-eight hours the engagement was made public; the marriage contract was drawn up, and it was announced that the wedding would take place early in the spring. A grand banquet was given at Sairmeuse in honor of the betrothal—a banquet all the more brilliant since there were other victories to be celebrated, for the Duc de Sairmeuse had just received, with his brevet of lieutenant-general, a commission placing him in command of the military district of Montaignac; while the Marquis de Courtornieu had also been appointed provost-marshal of the same region.

Thus it was that Blanche triumphed, for, after this public betrothal, might she not consider that Martial was bound to her? For a fortnight, indeed, he scarcely left her side, finding in her society a charm which almost made him forget his love for Marie-Anne. But, unfortunately, the haughty heiress could not resist the temptation to make a slighting allusion to the lowliness of the marquis's former tastes; finding, moreover, an opportunity to inform him that she furnished Marie-Anne with work to aid her in earning a living. Martial forced himself to smile; but the disparaging remarks made by his betrothed concerning Marie-Anne aroused his sympathy and indignation;

and the result was that the very next day he went to Lacheneur's house.

In the warmth of the greeting which there awaited him all his anger vanished, and all his suspicions were dispelled. He perceived that Marie-Anne's eyes beamed with joy on seeing him again, and could not help thinking he should win her yet.

All the household were really delighted at his return; as the son of the commander of the military forces at Montaignac, and the prospective son-in-law of the provost-marshal, Martial was bound to prove a most valuable instrument. "Through him we shall have an eye and an ear in the enemy's camp," said Lacheneur. "The Marquis de Sairmeuse will be our spy."

And such he soon became, for he speedily resumed his daily visits to the cottage. It was now December, and the roads were scarcely passable; but neither rain, snow, nor mud could keep Martial away. He generally made his appearance at ten o'clock in the morning, seated himself on a stool in the shadow of a tall fireplace, and then he and Marie-Anne began to talk by the hour. She always seemed greatly interested in what was going on at Montaignac, and he told her everything he knew, whether it were of a military, political, or social character.

At times they remained alone. Lacheneur, Chanlouineau, and Jean were tramping about the country with their pedler's packs. Business was indeed prospering so well that Lacheneur had even purchased a horse in order to extend the circuit of his rounds. But, although the usual occupants of the cottage might be away, it so happened that Martial's conversation was generally interrupted by visitors. It was indeed really surprising to see how many peasants called at the cottage to speak with M. Lacheneur. They called at all hours and in rapid succession, sometimes alone, and at others in little batches of two or three. And to each of these peasants Marie-Anne had something to say in private. Then she would offer them refreshments; and at times one might have imagined one's self in an ordinary village wine-shop. But what can daunt a lover's courage? Martial endured the peasants and their carouses without a murmur. He laughed and jested with them, shook them by the hand, and at times he even drained a glass in their company.

He gave many other proofs of moral courage. He offered

to assist M. Lacheneur in making up his accounts; and once—it happened about the middle of February—seeing Chanlouineau worrying over the composition of a letter, he actually volunteered to act as his amanuensis. "The letter is not for me, but for an uncle of mine who is about to marry off his daughter," said the stalwart young farmer.

Martial took a seat at the table, and at Chanlouineau's dictation, but not without many erasures, indited the following epistle:

"My dear Friend—We are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on. We are now busy preparing for the wedding, which will take place on ——. We invite you to give us the pleasure of your company. We count upon you, and be assured that the more friends you bring with you the better we shall be pleased."

Had Martial seen the smile upon Chanlouineau's lips when he requested him to leave the date for the wedding a blank, he would certainly have suspected that he had been caught in a snare. But he did not see it, and, besides, he was in love.

"Ah! marquis," remarked his father one day, "Chupin tells me you are always at Lacheneur's. When will you recover from your foolish fancy for that little girl?"

Martial did not reply. He felt that he was at that "little girl's" mercy. Each glance she gave him made his heart throb wildly. He lingered by her side a willing captive; and if she had asked him to make her his wife he would certainly not have refused.

But Marie-Anne had no such ambition. All her thoughts and wishes were for her father's success.

Maurice and Marie-Anne had become M. Lacheneur's most intrepid auxiliaries. They were looking forward to such a magnificent reward. Feverish, indeed, was the activity which Maurice displayed! All day long he hurried from hamlet to hamlet, and in the evening, as soon as dinner was over, he made his escape from the drawing-room, sprang into his boat, and hastened to La Reche.

M. d'Escorval could not fail to notice his son's long and frequent absences. He watched him, and soon discovered that some secret understanding existed between Maurice and Lacheneur. Recollecting his previous suspicion that Lacheneur was

harboring some seditious design, he became greatly alarmed for his son's safety, and decided to go to La Reche and try once more to learn the truth. Previous repulses had diminished his confidence in his own persuasive powers, and being anxious for an auxiliary's assistance he asked the Abbe Midon to accompany him.

It was the 4th of March, and half-past four in the evening, when M. d'Escorval and the cure started from Sairmeuse bound for the cottage at La Reche. They were both anxious as to the result of the step they were taking, and scarcely exchanged a dozen words as they walked toward the banks of the Oiselle. They had crossed the river and traversed the familiar pine grove, when on reaching the outskirts of the waste they witnessed a strange sight well calculated to increase their anxiety and alarm.

Night was swiftly approaching, but yet it was still sufficiently light to distinguish objects at a short distance, and on the summit of the slope they could perceive in front of Lacheneur's cottage a group of twenty persons, who, judging by their frequent gesticulations, were engaged in animated conversation. Lacheneur himself was there, and his manner plainly indicated that he was in a state of great excitement. Suddenly he waved his hand, the others clustered round him, and he began to speak. What was he saying? The baron and the priest were still too far off to distinguish his words, but when he ceased they were startled by a loud acclamation, which literally rent the air.

Suddenly the former lord of Sairmeuse struck a match, and setting fire to a bundle of straw lying before him he tossed it on to the roof of the cottage, shouting as he did so, "Yes, the die is cast! and this will prove to you that I shall not draw back!"

Five minutes later the house was in flames and in the distance the baron and his companion could perceive a ruddy glare illuminating the windows of the citadel at Montaignac, while on every hillside round about glowed the light of other incendiary fires. The whole district was answering Lacheneur's signal.

AH! ambition is a fine thing! The Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were considerably past middle age; they had weathered many storms and vicissitudes; they possessed millions in hard cash, and owned the finest estates in the province. Under these circumstances it might have been supposed that their only desire was to end their days in peace and quietness. It would have been easy for them to lead a happy and useful life by seeking to promote the welfare of the district, and they might have gone down to their graves amid a chorus of benedictions and regrets.

But no. They longed to have a hand in managing the state vessel; they were not content with remaining simple passengers. The duke, appointed to the command of the military forces, and the marquis, invested with high judicial functions at Montaignac, were both obliged to leave their beautiful chateaux and install themselves in somewhat dingy quarters in the town. And yet they did not murmur at the change, for their vanity was satisfied. Louis XVIII was on the throne; their prejudices were triumphant; and they felt supremely happy. It is true that sedition was already rife on every side, but had they not hundreds and thousands of allies at hand to assist them in suppressing it? And when thoughtful politicians spoke of "discontent," the duke and his associates looked at him with the thorough contempt of the skeptic who does not believe in ghosts.

On the 4th of March, 1816, the duke was just sitting down to dinner at his house in Montaignac when he heard a loud noise in the hall. He rose to go and see what was the matter when the door was suddenly flung open and a man entered the room panting and breathless. This man was Chupin, once a poacher, but now enjoying the position of head gamekeeper on the Sairmeuse estates. It was evident, from his manner and appearance, that something very extraordinary had happened.

"What is the matter?" inquired the duke.

"They are coming!" cried Chupin; "they are already on the way!"

"Who are coming? who?"

Chupin made no verbal reply, but handed the duke a copy of the letter written by Martial under Chanlouineau's dictation. "My dear friend," so M. de Sairmeuse read, "we are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on. We are now busy preparing for the wedding, which will take place on the 4th of March." The date was no longer blank: but still the duke had naturally failed to understand the purport of the missive. "Well, what of it?" he asked.

Chupin tore his hair. "They are on the way," he repeated. "The peasants—all the peasants of the district. They intend to take possession of Montaignac, dethrone Louis XVIII, bring back the emperor, or, at least, the emperor's son, and crown him as Napoleon II. Ah, the wretches! they have deceived me. I suspected this outbreak, but I did not think it was so near at hand."

This unexpected intelligence well-nigh stupefied the duke. "How many are there?" he asked.

"Ah! how do I know, your grace? Two thousand, perhaps—perhaps ten thousand."

"All the townspeople are with us."

"No, your grace, no. The rebels have accomplices here. All the retired officers of the imperial army are waiting to assist them."

"Who are the leaders of the movement?"

"Lacheneur, the Abbe Midon, Chanlouineau, the Baron d'Escorval—"

"Enough!" cried the duke.

Now that the danger was certain, his coolness returned, and his herculean form, a trifle bowed by the weight of years, rose to its full height. He gave the bell-rope a violent pull; and directly his valet entered he bade him bring his uniform and pistols at once. The servant was about to obey, when the duke added: "Wait! Let some one take a horse, and go and tell my son to come here without a moment's delay. Take one of the swiftest horses. The messenger ought to go to Sairmeuse and back in two hours." On hearing these words, Chupin pulled at the duke's coat-tail to attract his attention.

"Well, what is it now?" asked M. de Sairmeuse impatiently.

The old poacher raised his finger to his lips, as if recom-

mending silence, and as soon as the valet had left the room, he exclaimed:

"It is useless to send for the marquis!"

"And why, you fool?"

"Because, because—excuse me—I—"

"Zounds! will you speak, or not?"

Chupin regretted that he had gone so far. "Because the marquis—"

"Well?"

"He is engaged in it."

The duke overturned the dinner-table with a terrible blow of his clenched fist. "You lie, you wretch!" he thundered with terrible oaths.

His anger was so threatening that the old poacher sprang to the door and turned the knob, ready for flight. "May I lose my head if I do not speak the truth," he insisted. "Ah! Lacheneur's daughter is a regular sorceress. All the gallants of the neighborhood are in the ranks; Chanlouineau, young D'Escorval, your son—"

M. de Sairmeuse was pouring forth a torrent of curses upon Marie-Anne when his valet reentered the room. He suddenly checked himself, put on his uniform, and ordering Chupin to follow him, he hastened from the house. He was still hoping that Chupin had exaggerated the danger, but when he reached the Place d'Armes, commanding an extensive view of the surrounding country, whatever allusions he may have retained immediately vanished. Signal lights gleamed on every side, and Montaignac seemed surrounded by a circle of flame.

"There are the signals," murmured Chupin. "The rebels will be here before two o'clock in the morning."

The duke made no reply, but hastened toward M. de Courtornieu's house. He was striding onward, when, on turning a corner, he espied two men talking in a doorway; they also had perceived him, and at sight of his glittering epaulettes they both took flight. The duke instinctively started in pursuit, overtook one of the men, and, seizing him by the collar, sternly asked: "Who are you? What is your name?"

The man was silent, and his captor shook him so roughly that two pistols concealed under his overcoat fell to the ground. "Ah, brigand!" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse, "so you are one of the conspirators against the king!"

Then, without another word, he dragged the man to the cita-

del, gave him in charge of the astonished soldiers, and again hastened after M. de Courtornieu. He expected to find the marquis terrified; but on the contrary he seemed perfectly delighted.

"At last," he said, "there comes an opportunity for us to display our devotion and our zeal—and without danger! We have good walls, strong gates, and three thousand soldiers at our command. These peasants are fools! But be grateful for their folly, my dear duke, and run and order out the Montaignac chasseurs—" He suddenly paused, and then with a gesture of annoyance he resumed: "The deuce! I am expecting Blanche this evening. She was to leave Courtornieu after dinner. Heaven grant she may meet with no misfortune on the way!"

The Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had more time before them than they supposed. The rebels were advancing, but not so rapidly as Chupin had stated, for Lacheneur's plans had been disarranged by two unforeseen circumstances.

When standing beside his burning cottage, he had counted the signal fires that blazed out in answer to his own, and found their number corresponded with his expectations; he joyfully exclaimed: "See, all our friends keep their word! They are ready; and are now on their way to the meeting-place. Let us start at once, for we must be there first!"

His horse was brought him, and one foot was already in the stirrup when two men sprang from the neighboring grove and darted toward him. One of them seized the horse by the bridle.

"The Abbe Midon!" exclaimed Lacheneur in amazement; "M. d'Escorval!" And foreseeing, perhaps, what was to come, he added in a tone of concentrated fury: "What do you two want with me?"

"We wish to prevent the accomplishment of an act of madness!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "Hatred has crazed you, Lacheneur!"

"You know nothing of my projects!"

"Do you think that I don't suspect them? You hope to capture Montaignac—"

"What does that matter to you?" interrupted Lacheneur, angrily.

But M. d'Escorval would not be silenced. He seized his

former friend by the arm, and in a voice loud enough to be heard distinctly by every one present, he continued: "You foolish fellow! You have forgotten that Montaignac is a fortified city, surrounded by deep moats and high walls! You have forgotten that behind these fortifications there is a garrison commanded by a man whose energy and bravery are beyond all question—the Duc de Sairmeuse."

Lacheneur struggled to free himself from the baron's grasp. "Everything has been arranged," he replied, "and they are expecting us at Montaignac. You would be as sure of this as I am myself if you had only seen the lights gleaming in the windows of the citadel. And look, you can see them yet. These lights tell me that two or three hundred of Napoleon's old officers will come and open the gates of the town as soon as we make our appearance."

"And after that! If you take Montaignac, what will you do then? Do you imagine the English will give you back your emperor? Isn't Napoleon II an Austrian prisoner? Have you forgotten that the allied sovereigns have left a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers within a day's march of Paris?"

Sullen murmurs were heard among Lacheneur's followers.

"But all this is nothing," continued the baron. "The chief danger lies in the fact that there are generally as many traitors as dupes in an undertaking of this sort."

"Whom do you call dupes?"

"All those who mistake their illusions for realities, as you have done; all those who wishing something to happen are convinced that it *will* happen—simply because they wish it so. And besides, do you really suppose that neither the Duc de Sairmeuse nor the Marquis de Courtornieu has been warned of your attempt?"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders. "Who could have warned them?" he asked complacently. But his tranquillity was feigned, as the glance he cast on Jean only too plainly proved. Frigid indeed was the tone in which he added: "It is probable that the duke and the marquis are at this moment in the power of our friends."

The cure now attempted to second the baron's efforts. "You will not go, Lacheneur," he said. "You can not remain deaf to the voice of reason. You are an honest man; think of the frightful responsibility you assume! Upon these frail hopes you are imperilling hundreds of brave lives! I tell you that

you will not succeed; and will be betrayed; I am sure you will be betrayed!"

An expression of horrible agony contracted Lacheneur's features. It was evident to every one that he was deeply moved; and, perhaps, matters might have taken a very different course had it not been for Chanlouineau's intervention. "We are wasting too much time in foolish prattle," he exclaimed, stepping forward and brandishing his gun.

Lacheneur started as if he had been struck by a whip. He rudely freed himself from his friend's grasp, and leaped into the saddle. "Forward!" he ordered.

But the baron and the priest did not yet despair; they sprang to the horse's head. "Lacheneur," cried the priest, "beware! The blood you are about to spill will fall on your own head, and on the heads of your children!"

Arrested by these prophetic words, the little band paused, and at the same moment a figure clad in the costume of a peasant issued from the ranks.

"Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the abbe and the baron in the same breath.

"Yes, it is I," replied the young girl, doffing the large hat which had partially concealed her face; "I wish to share the dangers of those who are dear to me—share in their victory or their defeat. Your advice comes too late, gentlemen. Do you see those lights on the horizon? They tell us that the people of the province are repairing to the cross-roads at the Croix d'Arcy, our general meeting-place. Before two o'clock fifteen hundred men will be gathered there awaiting my father's commands. Would you have him leave these men, whom he has called from their peaceful firesides, without a leader? No, it is impossible!"

She evidently shared her lover's and her father's madness, even if she did not share all their hopes. "No, there must be no more hesitation, no more parleying," she continued. "Prudence now would be the height of folly. There is no more danger in a retreat than in an advance. Do not try to detain my father, gentlemen; each moment of delay may, perhaps, cost a man's life. And now, my friends, forward!"

A loud cheer answered her, and the little band descended the hill.

But M. d'Escorval could not allow his own son, whom he now

perceived in the ranks, to depart in this fashion: "Maurice!" he cried.

The young fellow hesitated, but finally stepped forward.

"You will not follow these madmen, Maurice?" said the baron.

"I must follow them, father."

"I forbid it."

"Alas! father, I can't obey you. I have promised—I have sworn. I am second in command." If his voice had a mournful ring, plainly enough he was at all events determined.

"My son!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval; "unfortunate boy! Don't you know that you are marching to certain death?"

"Then all the more reason, father, why I shouldn't break my word."

"And your mother, Maurice, your mother whom you forget!"

A tear glistened in the young fellow's eye. "I am sure," he replied, "that my mother would rather weep for her dead son than keep him near her dishonored, and branded as a coward and a traitor. Farewell! father."

M. d'Escorval appreciated the nobility of mind which Maurice's conduct implied. He opened his arms, and pressed his son convulsively to his heart, feeling that it might be for the last time in life. "Farewell!" he faltered, "farewell!"

A minute later Maurice had rejoined his comrades, now on the plain below, leaving the baron standing motionless and overwhelmed with sorrow.

Suddenly M. d'Escorval started from his reverie. "A single hope remains, abbe!" he cried.

"Alas!" murmured the priest.

"Oh—I am not mistaken. Marie-Anne just told us the place of rendezvous. By running to Escorval and harnessing the cabriolet, we might be able to reach the Croix d'Arcy before this party arrives there. Your voice, which touched Lacheneur, will touch the hearts of his accomplices. We will persuade these poor, misguided men to return home. Come, abbe; come quickly!"

They tarried no longer, but swiftly descended toward the ferry.

THE clock in the church tower of Sairmeuse was just striking eight when Lacheneur and his little band of followers left La Reche. An hour later, Blanche de Courtornieu, after dining alone with Aunt Medea at the chateau, ordered the carriage to take her to Montaignac. Since her father's duties had compelled him to reside in the town they only met on Sundays, when it either happened that Blanche went to Montaignac, or the marquis paid a visit to his estate.

Now this was Thursday evening, and the servants were consequently somewhat surprised when they heard that their young mistress was going to "the town."

Her journey was prompted, however, by somewhat singular circumstances.

Six days had elapsed since Martial's last visit to Courtornieu, six days of suspense and anguish for the jealous Blanche. What Aunt Medea had to endure during this interval, only poor dependents in rich families can understand. For the first three days Blanche succeeded in preserving a semblance of self-control; but on the fourth she could endure the suspense no longer, and in spite of the breach of etiquette the step involved, she despatched a messenger to Sairmeuse to inquire if Martial were ill, or if he had been summoned away?

The messenger learned that the young marquis was in very good health, and that he spent the entire day, from early morn to dewy eve, shooting in the neighboring preserves; going to bed every evening as soon as dinner was over.

What a horrible insult this conduct implied for Blanche! However, it did not so much distress her as she felt certain that directly Martial heard of her inquiries he would hasten to her with a full apology. Her hope was vain; he did not come; nor even condescend to give a sign of life.

"Ah! no doubt he is with that wretch," said Blanche to Aunt Medea. "He is on his knees before that miserable Marie-Anne —his mistress." For she had finished by believing—as is not

unfrequently the case—the very calumnies which she herself had invented.

Scarcely knowing how to act, she at last decided to make her father her confidant; and accordingly wrote him a note to the effect that she was coming to Montaignac for his advice. In reality, she wished her father to compel Lacheneur to leave the country. This would be an easy matter for the marquis, since he was armed with discretionary judicial authority at an epoch when lukewarm devotion furnished an ample excuse for sending a man into exile.

Fully decided upon executing this plan, Mademoiselle Courtornieu grew calmer on leaving the chateau; and her hopes overflowed in incoherent phrases, which poor Aunt Medea listened to with all her accustomed resignation. "At last," exclaimed the revengeful Blanche, "I shall be rid of this shameless creature. We will see if he has the audacity to follow her. Ah, no; he can not dare to do that!"

She was talking in this strain, or reflecting how she should lay the matter before her father, while the carriage which she and Aunt Medea occupied rolled over the highway and through the village of Sairmeuse.

There were lights in every house, the wine-shops seemed full of tipplers, and groups of people could be seen in every direction.

All this animation was no doubt most unusual, but what did it matter to Mademoiselle de Courtornieu! It was not until they were a mile or so from Sairmeuse that she was startled from her reverie.

"Listen, Aunt Medea," she suddenly exclaimed. "What is that noise?"

The poor dependent listened as she was bid, and both occupants of the carriage could distinguish a confused babel of shouts and singing, which grew nearer and more distinct as the vehicle rolled onward.

"Let us find out the meaning of all this hubbub," said Blanche. And lowering one of the carriage windows, she asked the coachman if he knew what the disturbance was about.

"I can see a great crowd of peasants on the hill," he replied; "they have torches and—"

"Blessed Jesus!" interrupted Aunt Medea in alarm.

"It must be a wedding," added the coachman, whipping up his horses.

It was not a wedding, however, but Lacheneur's little band, which had now swollen to five hundred men.

The Bonapartist ringleader should have been at the Croix d'Arcy two hours earlier. But he had shared the fate of most popular chieftains. He had given an impetus to the movement, and now it was beyond his control. The Baron d'Escorval had made him lose twenty minutes at La Reche, and he was delayed four times as long in Sairmeuse. When he reached that village, a little behind time, he found the peasants scattered through the wine-shops, drinking to the success of the enterprise; and it proved a long and difficult talk to wrest them from their merry-making. To crown everything, when the insurgents were finally induced to resume their line of march, they could not possibly be persuaded to extinguish the torches they had lighted. Prayers and threats were alike unavailing. They declared that they wished to see their way, and their leader had to submit to this foolish fancy. Poor deluded beings! They had not the slightest conception of the difficulties and the perils of the enterprise they had undertaken. They had set out to capture a fortified town, defended by a numerous garrison, just as if they had been bound on a pleasure jaunt. Gay, thoughtless, and animated with childlike confidence, they marched along, arm in arm, singing some patriotic refrain. Lacheneur, who was on horseback in the centre of the band, suffered the most intolerable anguish. Would not this delay ruin everything? What would the others, who were waiting at the Croix d'Arcy, think of him! What were they doing at this very moment? Maurice, Chanlouineau, Jean, Marie-Anne, and some twenty old soldiers of the Empire who accompanied the party, understood and shared Lacheneur's despair. They knew the terrible danger they were incurring, and, like their captain, they constantly repeated: "Faster! Let us march faster!"

Vain was the exhortation! The peasantry openly declared that they preferred walking slowly. Soon, indeed, they did not walk at all, but came to an abrupt halt. Still it was not hesitation that induced them to pause. The fact was that some of the band, chancing to look back, had perceived the lamps of Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's carriage gleaming in the darkness. The vehicle came rapidly onward, and soon overtook them. The peasants at once recognized the coachman's livery, and greeted the carriage with derisive shouts.

M. de Courtornieu's avarice had made him even more enemies

than the Duc de Sairmeuse's pride, and all the peasants who thought they had more or less to complain of his extortions were delighted at this opportunity to frighten him; for as this was his carriage, no doubt he was inside. Hence, their disappointment was great indeed when, on opening the carriage door, they perceived that the vehicle only contained Blanche and her elderly aunt. The latter shrieked with terror, but her niece, who was certainly a brave girl, haughtily asked: "Who are you? and what do you want?"

"You shall know to-morrow," replied Chanlouineau. "Until then, you are our prisoners."

"I see that you do not know who I am, boy."

"Excuse me. I do know who you are, and, for this very reason, I must request you to alight from your carriage. She must leave the carriage, must she not, M. d'Escorval?"

"I won't leave my carriage," retorted the infuriated heiress. "Tear me from it if you dare!"

They would certainly have dared to do so had it not been for Marie-Anne, who checked several peasants as they were springing toward the vehicle. "Let Mademoiselle de Courtornieu pass without hindrance," said she.

But this permission might produce such serious consequences that Chanlouineau found courage to resist. "That can not be, Marie-Anne," said he. "She will warn her father. We must keep her as a hostage; her life may save the lives of our friends."

Blanche had not hitherto recognized her former friend, any more than she had suspected the intentions of the crowd. But Marie-Anne's name, coupled with that of D'Escorval, enlightened her at once. She understood everything, and trembled with rage at the thought that she was at her rival's mercy. She immediately resolved to place herself under no obligation to Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

"Very well," said she, "we will alight."

But Marie-Anne checked her. "No," said she, "no! This is not proper company for a young girl."

"For an honest young girl, you should say," replied Blanche, with a sneer.

Chanlouineau was standing only a few feet off with his gun in his hand. If a man had spoken in this manner he would certainly have killed him on the spot.

"Mademoiselle will turn back," calmly rejoined Marie-Anne,

disdaining to notice the insult which her former friend's words implied. "As she can reach Montaignac by the other road, two men will accompany her as far as Courtornieu."

The order was obeyed. The carriage turned and rolled away, though not before Blanche had found time to cry: "Beware, Marie-Anne! I will make you pay dearly for your insulting patronage!"

The hours were flying by. This incident had occupied ten minutes more—ten centuries—and the last trace of order had vanished. Lacheneur could have wept with rage. Suddenly calling Maurice and Chanlouineau to his side, he said: "I place you in command, do everything you can to hurry these idiots onward. I will ride as fast as possible to the Croix d'Arcy."

He started, but he was only a short distance in advance of his followers when he perceived two men running toward him at full speed. One was clad in the attire of the middle classes; the other wore the old uniform of captain in the emperor's guard.

"What has happened?" cried Lacheneur in alarm.

"Everything is discovered!"

"Good heavens!"

"Major Carini has been arrested."

"By whom? How?"

"Ah! there was a fatality about it! Just as we were perfecting our arrangements to seize the Duc de Sairmeuse, he himself surprised us. We fled, but the cursed noble pursued us, overtook Carini, caught him by the collar, and dragged him to the citadel."

Lacheneur was overwhelmed; the abbe's gloomy prophecy again resounded in his ears.

"So I warned my friends, and hastened to warn you," continued the officer. "The affair is an utter failure!"

He was only too correct; and Lacheneur knew it even better than he did. But, blinded by hatred and anger, he would not acknowledge that the disaster was irreparable. He affected a calmness which he was far from feeling. "You are easily discouraged, gentlemen," he said, bitterly. "There is, at least, one more chance."

"The deuce! Then you have resources of which we are ignorant?"

"Perhaps—that depends. You have just passed the Croix

d'Arcy; did you tell any of those people what you have just told me?"

"Not a word."

"How many men are assembled there?"

"At least two thousand."

"And what is their mood?"

"They are all eagerness to begin the fight. They are cursing your slowness, and told me to entreat you to make haste."

"In that case our cause is not lost," said Lacheneur, with a determined gesture. "Wait here until the peasants come up, and impress upon them that you were sent to tell them to make haste. Bring them on as quickly as possible, and have confidence in me; I will be responsible for the success of the enterprise."

So speaking, he put spurs to his horse and galloped away. In point of fact, he had deceived the men he had just spoken with. He had no other resources, nor even the slightest hope that the enterprise might now prove successful. He had told an abominable falsehood. But if this edifice, which he had raised with such infinite care and labor, was to totter and fall, he wished to be buried beneath its ruins. They would be defeated; he felt sure of it, but what did that matter? In the conflict he would seek death and find it.

Bitter discontent pervaded the crowd at the Croix d'Arcy, the murmurs of dissatisfaction having changed to curses after the messengers despatched to warn Lacheneur of the disaster at Montaignac had passed by. These peasants, nearly two thousand in number, were indignant not to find their leader waiting for them at the rendezvous. "Where is he?" they asked each other. "Who knows, perhaps he has turned tail at the last moment? Perhaps he is concealing himself while we are here risking our lives and our children's bread."

Soon the epithets of mischief-maker and traitor flew from lip to lip, increasing the anger that swelled in every heart. Some were of opinion that it would be best to disperse; while others wished to march against Montaignac without waiting any longer for Lacheneur. The point was being deliberated when a vehicle appeared in sight. It was the Baron d'Escorval's cabriolet. He and the abbe were in advance of Lacheneur, and trusted that they had arrived in time to prevent any further prosecution of the enterprise. But although only a few minutes previously several of the insurgents had wavered, the

peacemakers found all their entreaties and warnings useless. Instead of arresting the movement, their intervention only precipitated it.

"We have gone too far to draw back," exclaimed one of the neighboring farmers, who was the recognized leader in Lacheneur's absence. "If death is before us, it is also behind us. To attack and conquer—that is our only hope of salvation. Forward, then, at once. That is the only way of disconcerting our enemies. He who hesitates is a coward! So forward!"

"Yes, forward!" reechoed the excited crowd. They unfurled the tricolor, the banner banished by the Bourbon kings, which reminded them of so much glory and such great misfortunes; the drums beat, and with loud shouts of, "Long live Napoleon the Second!" the whole column took up its line of march.

Pale, in disordered garb, and with voices husky with emotion and fatigue, M. d'Escorval and the abbe followed in the wake of the rebels, imploring them to listen to reason. These two alone perceived the precipice toward which these misguided men were rushing, and they prayed to providence for an inspiration that might enable them to arrest this foolish enterprise while there was yet time. In fifty minutes the distance separating the Croix d'Arcy from Montaignac is covered. Soon the insurgents perceive the gate of the citadel, which was to have been opened for them by their friends within the town. It is eleven o'clock, and this gate is opened. Does not this circumstance prove that their friends are masters of the town, and that they are awaiting them in force? Hence, the column boldly advances, so certain of success that those who carry guns do not even take the trouble to load them.

M. d'Escorval and the abbe alone foresee the catastrophe. They entreat the leader of the expedition not to neglect the commonest precautions; they implore him to send two men on in advance to reconnoitre; they themselves offer to go, on condition that the peasants will await their return before proceeding farther.

But their prayers are unheeded. The peasants pass the outer line of fortifications in safety, and the head of the advancing column reaches the drawbridge. The enthusiasm now amounts to delirium; and who will be the first to enter is the only thought.

Alas! at that very moment they hear a pistol fired. It is

a signal, for instantly, and on every side, resounds a terrible fusillade. Three or four peasants fall, mortally wounded. The remainder pause, terror-stricken and thinking only of escape. Still the leader encourages his men, there are a few of Napoleon's old soldiers in the ranks; and a struggle begins, all the more frightful owing to the darkness!

But it is not the cry of "Forward!" that suddenly rends the air. The voice of a coward raises the cry of panic: "We are betrayed! Let him save himself who can!"

Then comes the end of all order. A wild fear seizes the throng; and these men fly madly, despairingly, scattered as withered leaves are scattered by the force of the tempest.

XIV

AT first Chupin's extraordinary revelations and the thought that Martial, the heir of his name and dukedom, should so degrade himself as to enter into a conspiracy with vulgar peasants, had well-nigh overcome the Duc de Sairmeuse. However, M. de Courtornieu's composure soon restored his sang-froid. He hastened to the barracks, and in less than half an hour five hundred linesmen and three hundred Montaignac chasseurs were under arms. With those forces at his disposal it would have been easy enough to suppress the movement without the slightest bloodshed. It was only necessary to close the gates of the city, for it was not with clubs and fowling-pieces that these infatuated peasants could force an entrance into a fortified town.

Such moderation did not, however, suit a man of the duke's violent nature. Struggle and excitement were his elements, and ambition fanned his zeal. He ordered the gates of the citadel to be left open, and concealed numerous soldiers behind the parapets of the outer fortifications. He then stationed himself where he could command a view of the insurgents' approach, and deliberately choose his moment for giving the signal to fire. Still a strange thing happened. Out of four hundred shots fired into a dense mass of fifteen hundred men, only three

hit their mark. More humane than their commander, nearly all the soldiers had fired into the air.

However, the duke had no time to investigate this strange occurrence now. He leaped into the saddle, and placing himself at the head of several hundred men, both cavalry and infantry, he started in pursuit of the fugitives. The peasants were, perhaps, some twenty minutes in advance. These simple-minded fellows might easily have made their escape. They had only to disperse in twenty different directions; but unfortunately, this thought never once occurred to the majority of them. A few ran across the fields and then gained their homes in safety; while the others fled panic-stricken, like a flock of frightened sheep before the pursuing soldiers. Fear lent them wings, for at each moment they could hear the shots fired at the laggards.

There was one man, however, who was still steadily galloping in the direction of Montaignac; and this was Lacheneur. He had just reached the Croix d'Arcy when the firing began. He listened and waited. No discharge of musketry answered the first fusillade. What could be happening? Plainly there was no combat. Had the peasantry been butchered then? Lacheneur had a perception of the truth, and regretted that the bullets just discharged had not pierced his own heart. He put spurs to his horse and galloped past the cross-roads toward Montaignac. At last he perceived the fugitives approaching in the distance. He dashed forward to meet them, and mingling curses and insults together he vainly tried to stay their flight. "You cowards!" he vociferated, "you traitors! you fly and you are ten against one! Where are you going? To your own homes? Fools! you will only find the gendarmes there, waiting your coming to conduct you to the scaffold. Is it not better to die with your weapons in your hands? Come—right about. Follow me! We may still conquer. Reenforcements are at hand; two thousand men are following me!"

He promised them two thousand men; had he promised them ten thousand, twenty thousand—an army and cannon—it would have made no difference. Not until they reached the wide open space of the cross-roads, where they had talked so confidently scarcely an hour before, did the more intelligent of the throng regain their senses, while the others fled in every direction.

About a hundred of the bravest and most determined of the conspirators gathered round Lacheneur. In the midst of the

little crowd was the Abbe Midon with a gloomy and despondent countenance. He had been separated from the baron, of whose fate he was ignorant. Had M. d'Escorval been killed or taken prisoner? or was it possible that he had made his escape? The worthy priest dared not return home. He waited, hoping that his companion might rejoin him, and deemed himself fortunate in finding the baron's cabriolet still standing at a corner of the open space, formed by the four cross-roads. He was still waiting when the remnant of the column confided to Maurice and Chanlouineau came up. Of the five hundred men that composed this troop on its departure from Sairmeuse, only fifteen remained, including the two retired officers, who had escaped from Montaignac, and brought Lacheneur intelligence that the conspiracy was discovered. Marie-Anne was in the centre of this little party.

Her father and his friends were trying to decide what course should be pursued. Should each man go his own way? or should they unite, and by an obstinate resistance, give their comrades time to reach their homes?

Chanlouineau's voice put an end to the hesitation. "I have come to fight," he exclaimed, "and I shall sell my life dearly."

"We will make a stand then!" cried the others.

But Chanlouineau did not immediately follow them to the spot they considered best adapted for a prolonged defense; he called Maurice and drew him a little aside. "You must leave us at once, M. d'Escorval," he said, in a rough voice.

"I—I came here, Chanlouineau, as you did, to do my duty."

"Your duty, sir, is to serve Marie-Anne. Go at once, and take her with you."

"I shall remain," said Maurice firmly.

He was going to join his comrades when Chanlouineau stopped him. "You have no right to sacrifice your life here," he said quickly. "It belongs to the woman who has given herself to you."

"Wretch! how dare you—"

Chanlouineau sadly shook his head. "What is the use of denying it?" said he. "It was so great a temptation that only an angel could have resisted it. It was not your fault, nor was it hers. Lacheneur was a bad father. There was a day when I wanted either to kill myself or to kill you, I didn't know which. Ah! you certainly were near death that day. You were scarcely five paces from the muzzle of my gun. It was God

who stayed my hand by reminding me what her despair would be. But now that I have to die, and Lacheneur as well, some one must take care of Marie-Anne. Swear that you will marry her. You may be involved in some difficulty on account of this affair; but I have the means of saving you."

He was suddenly interrupted by a fusillade. The Duc de Sairmeuse's soldiers were approaching. "Good heavens!" exclaimed Chanlouineau, "and Marie-Anne."

They rushed in pursuit of her, and Maurice was the first to find her, standing in the centre of the open space clinging to the neck of her father's horse. He took her in his arms, trying to drag her away. "Come!" said he, "come!"

But she refused. "Leave me, leave me!" she entreated.

"But all is lost!"

"Yes, I know that all is lost—even honor. Leave me here. I must remain; I must die, and thus hide my shame. It must, it shall be so!"

Just then Chanlouineau reached them. Had he divined the secret of her resistance? Perhaps so, but at all events without uttering a word, he lifted her in his strong arms as if she had been a child, and carried her to the cabriolet, beside which the Abbe Midon was standing. "Get in," he said, addressing the priest, "and quick—take Mademoiselle Lacheneur. Now, Maurice, it's your turn!"

But the duke's soldiers were already masters of the field. They had perceived this little group and hastened forward. Brave Chanlouineau certainly was. He seized his gun, and brandishing it like a club managed to hold the enemy at bay, while Maurice sprang into the carriage, caught the reins, and started the horse off at a gallop. All the cowardice and all the heroism displayed on that terrible night will never be really known. Two minutes after the departure of the vehicle, Chanlouineau was still battling with the foe. He had at least a dozen men to deal with. Twenty shots had been fired, and yet he was unwounded, and his enemies almost believed him to be invulnerable.

"Surrender!" cried the soldiers, amazed by his bravery; "surrender!"

"Never! never!" he shrieked in reply, at the same time warding his assailants off with well-nigh superhuman strength and agility. The struggle might have lasted some time longer, had not one of the soldiers managed to crawl behind him, with-

out being perceived. This linesman seized Chanlouineau by the legs, and although the latter struggled furiously, he was taken at such a disadvantage that further resistance was impossible. He fell to the ground with a loud cry of "Help! friends, help!"

But no one responded to this appeal. At the other end of the open space those upon whom he called had virtually yielded, after a desperate struggle. The main body of the duke's infantry was near at hand. The rebels could hear the drums beating the charge and see the bayonets gleaming in the moonlight.

Lacheneur, who had remained on horseback amid his partizans, utterly ignoring the bullets that whistled round him, felt that his few remaining friends were about to be exterminated. At that supreme moment a vision of the past flitted before his mind's eye, with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. He read and judged his own heart. Hatred had led him to crime. He loathed himself for the humiliation which he had imposed upon his daughter, and cursed himself for the falsehoods with which he had deceived these brave men, for whose death he would be accountable to God. Enough blood had flowed; he must save those who remained. "Cease firing, my friends," he commanded; "retreat!"

They obeyed—he could see them scatter in every direction. He too could fly, for was he not mounted on a swift steed which would bear him beyond the reach of the enemy? But he had sworn that he would not survive defeat. Maddened with remorse, despair, sorrow, and impotent rage, he saw no refuge except in death. He had only to wait for it, for it was fast approaching; and yet he preferred to rush to meet it. Gathering up the reins, and applying the spurs he charged upon the enemy.

The shock was rude, the ranks opened, and there was a moment's confusion. Then Lacheneur's horse, wounded by a dozen bayonet thrusts, reared on its hind-legs, beat the air with its fore hoofs, and, falling backward, pinned its rider underneath. And the soldiers marched onward, not suspecting that the rider was struggling to free himself.

It was half-past one in the morning—the open space where the cross-roads met was virtually deserted. Nothing could be heard save the moans of a few wounded men calling on their comrades for succor. Before thinking of attending to the wounded, M. de Sairmeuse had to occupy himself with his own

personal interests and glory. Now that the insurrection had, so to say, been suppressed, it was necessary to exaggerate its magnitude as much as possible, in order that his grace's reward might be in proportion with the services he would be supposed to have rendered. Some fifteen or twenty rebels had been captured; but these were not sufficient to give the victory all the *eclat* which the duke desired. He must find more culprits to drag before the provost-marshal or before a military commission. He, therefore, divided his troops into several detachments, and sent them in every direction with orders to explore the villages, search the houses, and arrest all suspected persons. Having given this order and recommended implacable severity, he turned his horse and started at a brisk trot for Montaignac.

Like his friend, M. de Courtornieu, he would have blessed these honest, artless conspirators, had not a growing fear impaired his satisfaction. Was his son, the Marquis de Sairmeuse, really implicated in this conspiracy or not? The duke could scarcely believe in Martial's connivance, and yet the recollection of Chupin's assertions troubled him. On the other hand, what could have become of Martial? Had he been met by the servant sent to warn him? Was he returning? And, in that case, by which road? Had he fallen into the hands of the peasants? So many questions which could not with certainty be answered.

His grace's relief was intense when, on reaching his residence in Montaignac, after a conference with M. de Courtornieu, he learned that Martial had returned home about a quarter of an hour before. The servant who brought him this news added that the marquis had gone to his own room directly he dismounted from his horse.

"All right," replied the duke. "I will go to him there." At the same time, however, despite his outward placidity of manner, he was secretly murmuring: "What abominable impertinence! What! I am on horseback at the head of my troops, my life imperiled, and my son goes quietly to bed without even assuring himself of my safety!"

He reached Martial's room, and finding the door closed and locked on the inside, rapped angrily against the panel.

"Who is there?" inquired the young marquis.

"It is I," replied the duke; "open the door."

Martial at once complied, and M. de Sairmeuse entered; but

the sight that met his gaze made him tremble. On the table stood a basin full of blood, and Martial, with bare chest, was bathing a large wound near the right temple.

"You have been fighting!" exclaimed the duke, in an agitated voice.

"Yes."

"Ah!—then you were, indeed—"

"I was where?—what?"

"Why, at the rendezvous of those miserable peasants who, in their folly, dared to dream of overthrowing the best of princes!"

"I think you must be jesting, sir," replied Martial, in a tone of deep surprise, which somewhat reassured his father, though it failed to dissipate his suspicions entirely.

"Then these vile rascals attacked you?" inquired M. de Sairmeuse.

"Not at all. I have been simply obliged to fight a duel."

"With whom? Name the scoundrel who has dared to insult you.

A faint flush tinged Martial's cheek; but it was with his usual careless manner that he replied: "Upon my word, no; I shall not give his name. You would trouble him, perhaps; and I really owe the fellow a debt of gratitude. It happened upon the highway; he might have murdered me without ceremony had he only chosen, but he offered me open combat. Besides, he was wounded far more severely than I."

All M. de Sairmeuse's doubts had now returned. "And why, instead of summoning a physician, are you attempting to dress this wound yourself?"

"Because it is a mere trifle, and because I wish to keep it a secret."

The duke shook his head. "All this is scarcely plausible," he remarked; "especially after the statements made to me concerning your complicity in the revolt."

"Ah!" said the young marquis, "so your head spy has been at work again. However, I am certainly surprised that you can hesitate for a moment between your son's word and the stories told you by such a wretch."

"Don't speak ill of Chupin, marquis; he is a very useful man. Had it not been for him, we should have been taken unawares. It was through him that I learned of this vast conspiracy organized by Lacheneur—"

"What! is it Lacheneur—"

"Who is at the head of the movement?—yes, marquis. Ah! your usual discernment has failed you in this instance. What, you were a constant visitor at his house, and yet you suspected nothing? And you contemplate a diplomatic career! But this is not everything. Now you know what became of the money you so lavishly bestowed on these people. They used it to purchase guns, powder, and ammunition."

The duke was satisfied that his earlier suspicions concerning his son's complicity were without foundation; still he could not resist the temptation to taunt Martial anent his intimacy with the ex-steward of Sairmeuse. But, despite the bitterness of the situation, it proved a fruitless effort. Martial knew very well that he had been duped, but he did not think of resentment.

"If Lacheneur has been captured," he murmured to himself, "if he were condemned to death, and if I could only save him, then Marie-Anne would have nothing to refuse me."

XV

WHEN the Baron d'Escorval divined the reason of his son's frequent absences from home, he studiously avoided speaking on the matter to his wife; and, indeed, he did not even warn her of his purpose when he went to ask the Abbe Midon to go with him to Lacheneur's. This was the first time that he had ever had a secret from the faithful partner of his life; and his silence fully explains the intensity of Madame d'Escorval's astonishment when at dinner time Maurice was sometimes late; but the baron, like all great workers, was punctuality itself. Hence his non-arrival could only be due to some extraordinary occurrence. Madame d'Escorval's surprise developed into uneasiness when she ascertained that her husband had started off in the Abbe Midon's company, that they had harnessed a horse to the cabriolet themselves, driving through the stable-yard into a lane leading to the public road, in lieu of passing through the courtyard in front of the house, as was the

usual practise. This strange precaution must necessarily conceal some mystery.

Madame d'Escorval waited, oppressed by vague forebodings. The servants shared her anxiety; for the baron's affability and kindness had greatly endeared him to all his dependents. Long hours passed by, but eventually, at about ten o'clock in the evening, a peasant returning from Sairmeuse passed by the chateau, and seeing the servants clustering in front of the garden gate he stopped short, and with the loquacity of a man who has just been sacrificing at the altar of Bacchus, proceeded to relate the most incredible stories. He declared that all the peasantry for ten leagues around were under arms, and that the Baron d'Escorval was the leader of a revolt organized for the restoration of the Empire. He did not doubt the final success of the movement, boldly stating that Napoleon II, Marie-Louise, and all the marshals were concealed in Montaignac. Alas! it must be confessed that Lacheneur had not hesitated to utter the grossest falsehoods in his anxiety to gain followers to his cause. Madame d'Escorval, before whom this peasant was conducted, could not be deceived by these ridiculous stories, but she could and did believe that the baron was the prime mover in the insurrection. And this belief, which would have carried consternation to many women's hearts, absolutely reassured her. She had entire, unlimited faith in her husband. She believed him superior to all other men—infallible, in short. Hence, if he had organized a movement, that movement was right. If he had attempted it, it was because he expected to succeed; and if he looked for success, to her mind it was certain.

Impatient, however, to know the result, she despatched the gardener to Sairmeuse with orders to obtain information without awakening suspicion, if possible, and to hasten back as soon as he could learn anything of a positive nature. He returned shortly after midnight, pale, frightened, and in tears. The disaster had already become known, and had been described to him with any amount of exaggeration. He had been told that hundreds of men had been killed, and that a whole army was scouring the country, massacring the defenseless peasants and their families.

While he was telling his story, Madame d'Escorval felt as if she were going mad. She saw—yes, positively, saw her son and her husband, dead—or still worse, mortally wounded, stretched on the public highway—lying with their arms crossed upon

their breasts, livid, bloody, their eyes staring wildly—begging for water—a drop of water to assuage their burning thirst. "I will find them!" she exclaimed, in frenzied accents. "I will go to the battlefield and seek for them among the dead, until I find them. Light some torches, my friends, and come with me, for you will aid me, will you not? You loved them; they were so good! You would not leave their dead bodies unburied! Oh! the wretches! the wretches who have killed them!"

The servants were hastening to obey when the furious gallop of a horse and the rapid roll of carriage-wheels were heard. "Here they come!" exclaimed the gardener, "here they come!"

Madame d'Escorval, followed by the servants, rushed to the gate just in time to see a cabriolet enter the courtyard, and the panting horse, flecked with foam, miss his footing, and fall. The Abbe Midon and Maurice had already sprung to the ground and were removing an apparently lifeless body from the vehicle. Even Marie-Anne's great energy had not been able to resist so many successive shocks. The last trial had overwhelmed her. Once in a carriage, all immediate danger having disappeared, the excitement which had sustained her fled. She became unconscious, and all efforts had hitherto failed to restore her. Madame d'Escorval, however, did not recognize Mademoiselle Lacheneur in her masculine attire. She only saw that the body Maurice and the priest were carrying was not her husband, and, turning to her son, exclaimed in a stifled voice: "And your father—your father, where is he?"

Until that moment, Maurice and the cure had comforted themselves with the hope that M. d'Escorval would reach home before them. They were now cruelly undeceived. Maurice tottered, and almost dropped his precious burden. The abbe perceived his anguish, and made a sign to two servants, who gently lifted Marie-Anne, and bore her to the house. Then turning to Madame d'Escorval the cure exclaimed at hazard: "The baron will soon be here, madame, he fled first—"

"The Baron d'Escorval could not have fled," she interrupted. "A general does not desert when he is face to face with the enemy. If a panic seizes his soldiers, he rushes to the front, and either leads them back to combat, or sacrifices his own life."

"Mother!" faltered Maurice; "mother!"

"Oh! do not try to deceive me. My husband was the organizer of this conspiracy. If his confederates have been beaten

and dispersed they must have proved themselves cowards. Heaven have mercy upon me, my husband is dead!"

In spite of the abbe's quickness of perception, he could not understand these assertions on the part of the baroness; and feared that sorrow and terror had tampered with her mind. "Ah! madame," he exclaimed, "the baron had nothing to do with this movement: far from it—" He paused; they were standing in the courtyard, in the full glare of the torches lighted by the servants a moment previously. Any one passing along the public road could hear and see everything; and in the present situation such imprudence might have fatal results. "Come, Madame," accordingly resumed the priest, leading the baroness toward the house; "and you, Maurice, come as well!"

Madame d'Escorval and her son passively obeyed the summons. The former seemed crushed by unspeakable anguish, but on entering the drawing-room she instinctively glanced at the seemingly lifeless form extended on the sofa. This time she recognized Marie-Anne. "What, Mademoiselle Lacheneur!" she faltered, "here in this costume? dead?"

One might indeed believe that the poor girl was dead, to see her lying there rigid, cold, and as white as if the last drop of blood had been drained from her veins. Her beautiful face had the motionless pallor of marble; her half-open, colorless lips disclosed her teeth, clenched convulsively, and a large dark blue circle surrounded her closed eyelids. Her long black hair, which she had rolled up closely, so as to slip it under her peasant's hat, was now unwound, and fell confusedly over the sofa and her shoulders.

"There is no danger," declared the abbe, after he had examined her. "She has only fainted, and it will not be long before she regains consciousness." And then, rapidly but clearly, he gave the necessary directions to the servants, who were as astonished as their mistress.

"What a night!" murmured Madame d'Escorval, as, staring on the scene with dilated eyes, she mechanically wiped her forehead, covered with cold perspiration.

"I must remind you, madame," said the priest sympathizingly, but firmly, "that reason and duty alike forbid your yielding to despair! Wife, where is your energy? Christian, what has become of your confidence in a just and protecting Providence!"

"Oh, I have courage left," faltered the wretched woman. "I am brave!"

The abbe led her to a large armchair and compelled her to sit down. Then in a gentler tone, he resumed: "Besides, why should you despair, madame? Your son is with you in safety. Your husband has not compromised himself; he has done nothing more than I have done myself." And briefly, but with rare precision, the priest explained the part which he and the baron had played during this unfortunate evening.

Instead of reassuring the baroness, however, his recital seemed to increase her anxiety. "I understand you," she interrupted, "and I believe you. But I also know that all the people in the country round about are convinced that my husband commanded the rebels. They believe it, and they will say it."

"And what of that?"

"If he has been arrested, as you give me to understand may be the case, he will be summoned before a court-martial. Was he not one of the emperor's friends? That alone is a crime, as you know very well yourself. He will be convicted and sentenced to death."

"No, madame, no! Am I not here? I will go to the tribunal and say: 'I have seen and know everything.'"

"But they will arrest you as well, for you are not a priest after their cruel hearts. They will throw you into prison, and you will meet him on the scaffold."

Maurice had been listening with a pale, haggard face. "Ah, I shall have been the cause of the death of my father," he exclaimed, as he heard these last words, and then, despite all the abbe's attempts to silence him, he continued: "Yes, I shall have killed him. He was ignorant even of the existence of this conspiracy desired by Lacheneur; but I knew of it, and wished to succeed, because on it the success, the happiness of my life depended. And then—wretch that I was!—at times when I wished to gain a waverer in our ranks, I mentioned the honored name of D'Escorval. Ah! I was mad!—I was mad! And yet, even now, I have not the courage to curse my folly! Oh, mother, mother, if you knew—"

The young fellow paused, the sobs which convulsively rose in his throat choking all further utterances. Just then a faint moan was heard. Marie-Anne was slowly regaining consciousness. She seemed intensely puzzled by the scene around her, and passed her hands before her wandering eyes as if to ascertain whether she were really awake or not. At one moment she opened her mouth as if to speak, but the Abbe Midon

checked her with a hasty gesture. Maurice's confession and his mother's remarks had fully enlightened the priest as to the danger threatening the D'Escorvals. How could it be averted? There was no time for reflection. He must decide and act at once. Accordingly, he darted to the door and summoned the servants, still clustering in the hall and on the staircase. "Listen to me attentively," said he, in that quick imperious voice which unhesitatingly impresses the hearer with the certainty of approaching peril, "and remember that your master's life depends, perhaps, upon your discretion. We can rely upon you, can we not?"

Simultaneously the little group of dependents raised their hands, as if to call upon Heaven to witness their fidelity.

"In less than an hour," continued the priest, "the soldiers sent in pursuit of the fugitives will be here. Not a word must be said concerning what has happened this evening. Whoever questions you must be led to suppose that I went away with the baron, and returned alone. Not one of you must have seen Mademoiselle Lacheneur. We are going to conceal her. Remember, my friends, that all is lost if the slightest suspicion of her presence here is roused. Should the soldiers question you, try and convince them that M. Maurice has not left the house this evening." The priest paused for a moment, trying to think if he had forgotten any other precaution that human prudence could suggest; then he added again: "One word more; to see you standing about at this hour of the night will awaken suspicion at once. However, we must plead in justification the alarm we feel at the baron's prolonged absence. Besides, Madame d'Escorval is ill and that will furnish another excuse. She must go to bed at once, for by this means she may escape all awkward questioning. As for you, Maurice, run and change your clothes; and above all, wash your hands, and sprinkle some scent over them."

Those who heard the abbe were so impressed with the imminence of the danger that they were more than willing to obey his orders. As soon as Marie-Anne could be moved, she was carried to a tiny garret under the roof; while Madame d'Escorval retired to her own room, and the servants went back to the kitchen. Maurice and the abbe remained alone in the drawing-room. They were both cruelly oppressed by anxiety, and shared the opinion that the Baron d'Escorval had been made a prisoner. In that event, the Abbe Midon felt that all he could usefully at-

tempt was to try and save Maurice from any charge of complicity. "And who knows," he muttered, "the son's freedom may save the father's life?"

At that moment, his meditations were interrupted by a violent pull at the bell of the front gate. The gardener could be heard hastening to answer the summons, the gate grated on its hinges, and then the measured tread of soldiers resounded over the gravel. Half a minute later a loud voice commanded: "Halt!"

The priest looked at Maurice and saw that he was as pale as death. "Be calm," he entreated, "don't be alarmed. Don't lose your self-possession—and, above all, don't forget my instructions."

"Let them come," replied Maurice. "I am prepared."

Scarcely had he spoken than the drawing-room door was flung violently open, and a captain of grenadiers entered the apartment. He was a young fellow of five-and-twenty, tall, fair-haired, with blue eyes, and a little, carefully waxed mustache. No doubt on ordinary occasions this military dandy's features wore the coxcomb's usual look of self-complacency, but for the time being he had a really ferocious air. The soldiers by whom he was accompanied awaited his orders in the hall. After glancing suspiciously round the apartment, he asked in a harsh voice: "Who is the master of this house?"

"The Baron d'Escorval, my father, who is absent," replied Maurice.

"Where is he?"

The abbe, who had hitherto remained seated, now rose to his feet. "On hearing of the unfortunate outbreak of this evening," he replied, "the baron and myself went after the peasants in the hope of inducing them to relinquish their foolish undertaking. They would not listen to us. In the confusion that ensued, I became separated from the baron; I returned here very anxious, and am now waiting for his return."

The captain twisted his mustache with a sneering air. "Not a bad invention!" said he. "Only I don't believe a word of it."

A threatening light gleamed in the priest's eyes, and his lips trembled for a moment. However, he prudently held his peace.

"Who are you?" rudely asked the officer.

"I am the cure of Sairmeuse."

"Honest men ought to be in bed at this hour. And you are racing about the country after rebellious peasants. Really, I don't know what prevents me from ordering your arrest."

What did prevent him was the priestly robe, all powerful under the Restoration. With Maurice, however, the swaggering swashbuckler was more at ease. "How many are there in this family of yours?" he asked.

"Three; my father, my mother—ill at this moment—and myself."

"And how many servants?"

"Seven—four men and three women."

"You haven't housed or concealed any one here this evening?"

"No one."

"It will be necessary to prove that," rejoined the captain; and, turning toward the door, he called: "Corporal Bavois, step here!"

This corporal proved to be one of the old soldiers who had followed the emperor all over Europe. Two tiny, but piercing gray eyes lighted his tanned, weather-beaten face, and an immense hooked nose surmounted a heavy, bristling mustache. "Bavois," commanded the officer, "take half a dozen men and search this house from top to bottom. You are an old fox, and if there be any hiding-place here, you will be sure to discover it. If you find any one concealed here, bring the person to me. Go, and make haste!"

The corporal saluted and turned on his heels; while the captain walked toward Maurice: "And now," said he, "what have you been doing this evening?"

The young man hesitated for a moment: then, with well-feigned indifference, replied: "I have not put my head out of doors."

"Hum! that must be proved. Let me see your hands."

The soldier's tone was so offensive that Maurice felt the blood rise to his forehead. Fortunately a warning glance from the abbe made him restrain himself. He offered his hands for inspection, and the captain, after examining them carefully on either side, took the final precaution to smell them. "Ah!" quoth he, "these hands are too white and smell too sweet to have been dabbling with powder."

At the same time he was somewhat surprised that this young man should have so little courage as to remain by the fireside at home, while his father was leading the peasants on to battle. "Another thing," said he: "you must have some weapons here?"

"Yes, a few hunting rifles."

"Where are they?"

"In a small room on the ground floor."

"Take me there."

They conducted him to the room, and on finding that none of the guns had been used, at least for some days, he seemed considerably annoyed. But his disappointment reached a climax when Corporal Bavois returned and stated that he had searched everywhere, without finding anything of a suspicious character.

"Send for the servants," was the officer's next order; but all the dependents faithfully confined themselves to the story invented by the Abbe Midon, and the captain perceived that even if a mystery existed, as he suspected, he was not likely to fathom it. Swearing that all the inmates of the house should pay a heavy penalty if they were deceiving him, he again called Bavois and told him that he should resume the search himself. "You," he added, "will remain here with two men, and I shall expect you to render a strict account of all you see and hear. If M. d'Escorval returns, bring him to me at once; do not allow him to escape. Keep your eyes open and good luck to you!"

He added a few words in a low voice, and then left the room as abruptly as he had entered it. Scarcely had the sound of his footsteps died away than the corporal gave vent to his disgust in a frightful oath. *"Hein!"* said he to his men, "did you hear that cadet? Listen, watch, arrest, report. So he takes us for spies! Ah! if the Little Corporal only knew how his old soldiers were degraded!"

The two men responded with sullen growls.

"As for you," pursued the old trooper, addressing Maurice and the abbe, "I, Bavois, corporal of the grenadiers, declare in my own name and in that of my comrades here, that you are as free as birds, and that we shall arrest no one. More than that, if we can aid you in any way, we are at your service. The little fool who commands us this evening thought we were fighting. Look at my gun—I have not fired a shot from it—and my comrades only fired blank cartridges." The statement might possibly be a sincere one, but was scarcely probable.

"We have nothing to conceal," replied the cautious priest.

The old corporal gave a knowing wink. "Ah! you distrust me!" said he. "You are wrong, as I'll show you. It may be easy to gull that fool who has just left here, but it's not so easy to deceive Corporal Bavois. And if you had intended to do so, you shouldn't have left a gun in the courtyard, which was certainly never loaded for firing at swallows."

The cure and Maurice exchanged glances of consternation. Maurice now recollected, for the first time, that on alighting from the cabriolet on his return he had hastily propped the loaded gun against the wall. The weapon had subsequently escaped the servants' notice.

"Secondly!" resumed Bavois, "there is some one concealed in the attic. I have excellent ears. Thirdly, I arranged matters so that no one should enter the sick lady's room."

Maurice needed no further proof. He held out his hand to the corporal, and, in a voice trembling with emotion, replied: "You are a noble fellow!"

A few moments later—the three grenadiers having retired to another room, where they were served with supper—Maurice, the abbe, and Madame d'Escorval were again deliberating concerning their future action, when Marie-Anne entered the apartment with a pale face, but firm step. "I must leave this house," she said to the baroness in a tone of quiet resolution. "Had I been conscious, I would never have accepted hospitality which is likely to bring such misfortune on your family. Your acquaintance with me has cost you too much sorrow already. Don't you understand now why I wished you to look on us as strangers? A presentiment told me that my family would prove fatal to yours!"

"Poor child!" exclaimed Madame d'Escorval; "where will you go?"

Marie-Anne raised her beautiful eyes to heaven. "I don't know, madame," she replied, "but duty commands me to go. I must learn what has become of my father and brother, and share their fate."

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "still this thought of death. You, who no longer—" He paused, for a secret which was not his own had almost escaped his lips. But visited by a sudden inspiration, he threw himself at his mother's feet. "Oh, my mother! my dearest mother, do not allow her to go," he cried. "I may perish in my attempt to save my father. She will be your daughter then—she whom I have loved so dearly. She can not leave us. You will encircle her with your tender and protecting love; and maybe, after all these trials, happier times will come."

Touched by her son's despair, Madame d'Escorval turned to Marie-Anne, and with her winning words soon prevailed upon her to remain.

THE baroness knew nothing of the secret which Marie-Anne had revealed at the Croix d'Arcy, when she proclaimed her desire to die by her father's side; but Maurice was scarcely uneasy on that score, for his faith in his mother was so great that he felt sure she would forgive them both when she learned the truth. Not unfrequently does it happen, that of all women, chaste and loving wives and mothers are precisely the most indulgent toward those whom the voice of passion has led astray.

Comforted by this reflection, which reassured him as to the future of the girl he loved, Maurice now turned all his thoughts toward his father.

The day was breaking, and he declared that he would disguise himself as best he could, and go to Montaignac at once. It was not without a feeling of anxiety that Madame d'Escorval heard him speak in this manner. She was trembling for her husband's life, and now her son must hurry into danger. Perhaps before the day was over neither husband nor son would be left to her. And yet she did not forbid his going; for she felt that he was only fulfilling a sacred duty. She would have loved him less had she supposed him capable of cowardly hesitation, and would have dried her tears if necessary to bid him "go." Moreover, was not anything preferable to the agony of suspense which they had been enduring for hours?

Maurice had reached the drawing-room door when the abbe called him back. "You must certainly go to Montaignac," said he, "but it would be folly to disguise yourself. You would surely be recognized, and the saying, 'He who conceals himself is guilty,' would at once be applied to you. You must proceed openly, with head erect, and you must even exaggerate the assurance of innocence. Go straight to the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu. I will accompany you; we will go together in the carriage."

"Take this advice, Maurice," said Madame d'Escorval, see-

ing that her son seemed undecided; "the abbe knows what is best much better than we do."

The cure had not waited for the assent which Maurice gave to his mother's words, but had already gone to order the carriage to be got ready. On the other hand, Madame d'Escorval now left the room to write a few lines to a lady friend, whose husband had considerable influence in Montaignac; and Maurice and Marie-Anne were thus left alone. This was the first moment of freedom they had found since Marie-Anne's confession. "My darling," whispered Maurice, clasping the young girl to his heart, "I did not think it was possible to love more fondly than I loved you yesterday; but now— And you—you wish for death when another precious life depends on yours."

"I was terrified," faltered Marie-Anne. "I was terrified at the prospect of shame which I saw—which I still see before me; but now I am resigned. My frailty deserves punishment, and I must submit to the insults and disgrace awaiting me."

"Insults! Let any one dare insult you! But will you not now be my wife in the sight of men, as you are in the sight of heaven? The failure of your father's scheme sets you free!"

"No, no, Maurice, I am not free! Ah! it is you who are pitiless! I see only too well that you curse me, that you curse the day when we met for the first time! Confess it!" And so speaking, Marie-Anne lifted her streaming eyes to his. "As for me," she resumed, "I could not say so. Grievous my fault is, no doubt I am disgraced and humiliated, but still—"

She could not finish; Maurice drew her to him, and their lips and their tears met in one long embrace. "You love me," he exclaimed, "you love me in spite of everything! We shall succeed. I will save your father, and mine—I will save your brother too."

He had no time to say more. The baron's berlin, to which a couple of horses had been harnessed, that they might reach Montaignac with greater speed, was waiting in the courtyard; and the abbe's voice could be heard calling on Maurice to make haste, and Madame d'Escorval, moreover, now returned, carrying a letter which she handed to her son. One long, last embrace, and then leaving the two women to their tears and prayers, Maurice and the abbe sprang into the carriage, which was soon dashing along the highroad toward Montaignac.

"If, by confessing your own guilt, you could save your father," said the Abbe Midon as they rolled through the vil-

lage of Sairmeuse, "I should tell you to give yourself up and confess the whole truth. Such would be your duty. But such a sacrifice would be not only useless, but dangerous. Your confessions of guilt would only implicate your father still more. You would be arrested, but they would not release him, and you would both be tried and convicted. Let us then allow—I will not say justice, for that would be blasphemy—but these bloodthirsty men, who call themselves judges, to pursue their course, and attribute all that you yourself have done to your father. When the trial comes on you will be able to prove his innocence, and to produce alibis of so unimpeachable a character that they will be forced to acquit him. And I understand the people of our province well enough to feel sure that none of them will reveal our stratagem."

"And if we should not succeed in that way," asked Maurice, gloomily, "what could I do then?"

The question was so grave a one that the priest did not even try to answer it, and, tortured with anxiety and cruel forebodings, he and Maurice remained silent during the rest of the journey. When they reached the town young D'Escorval realized the abbe's wisdom in preventing him from assuming a disguise; for, armed as they were with absolute power, the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had closed all the gates of Montaignac but one, through which all those who desired to leave or enter the town were obliged to pass; two officers being, moreover, stationed beside it, to examine and question all comers and goers. Maurice noticed these officers' surprise when, on being asked who he was, he gave them the name of D'Escorval. "Ah! you know what has become of my father!" he exclaimed.

"The Baron d'Escorval is a prisoner," replied one of the officers.

Although Maurice had expected this reply, he turned pale with suppressed emotion. "Is he wounded?" he asked, eagerly.

"He hasn't a scratch," was the answer; "but please pass on." From the tone of this last remark, and the anxious looks the officers exchanged one might have supposed that they feared they might compromise themselves by conversing with the son of so great a criminal.

The carriage rolled under the archway, and had gone a couple of hundred yards or so along the Grand Rue when Maurice noticed a large poster affixed to one of the walls, and

which an elderly man was busy perusing. Instinctively both the occupants of the vehicle felt that this notice must have some connection with the revolt; and they were not mistaken, for on springing to the ground they themselves read as follows: "We, commander of the Military Division of Montaignac, in virtue of the State of Siege, decree: Article I. The inmates of the house in which the elder Lacheneur is found shall be handed over to a military commission for trial. Article II. Whoever shall deliver up the body of the elder Lacheneur, dead or alive, will receive a reward of twenty thousand francs. *Signed:* Duc de Sairmeuse."

"God be praised!" exclaimed Maurice when he had finished his perusal. "Then Marie-Anne's father has escaped! He had a good horse, and in two hours—"

A glance and a nudge from the abbe checked him; and in turning he recognized that the man standing near them was none other than Father Chupin. The old scoundrel had also recognized them, for he took off his hat to the cure, and with an expression of intense covetousness remarked: "Twenty thousand francs! What a sum! A man could live comfortably all his life on the interest."

The abbe and Maurice shuddered as they reentered the carriage. "Lacheneur is lost if that man discovers his whereabouts," murmured the priest.

"Fortunately he must have crossed the frontier before now," replied Maurice. "A hundred to one he is beyond reach."

"And if you should be mistaken? What, if wounded and faint from loss of blood, Lacheneur only had strength enough to drag himself to the nearest house and implore the hospitality of its inmates?"

"Oh! even in that case he is safe; I know our peasants. There is not one who is capable of selling the life of a proscribed man."

This youthful enthusiasm elicited a sad smile from the priest. "You forget the dangers to be incurred by those who shelter him," he said. "Many a man who would not soil his hands with the price of blood might deliver up a fugitive from fear."

They were passing through the principal street, and were struck with the mournful aspect of the little city, usually so gay and full of bustle. The shops were closed, and even the window shutters of the houses had not been opened. So lugubrious was the silence that one might have supposed there was

a general mourning, and that each family had lost one or more of its members. The manner of the few persons passing along the footways testified to their deep anxiety. They hurried along, casting suspicious glances on every side; and two or three who were acquaintances of the Baron d'Escorval averted their heads directly they saw his carriage, so as to avoid the necessity of bowing.

The terror prevailing in the town was explained when Maurice and the abbe reached the Hotel de France, where they proposed taking up their quarters; and which establishment the former's father had always patronized whenever he visited Montaignac, the landlord being Laugeron—Lacheneur's friend, who had been so anxious to warn him of the Duc de Sairmeuse's return to France. On catching sight of his visitors, this worthy man hastened into the courtyard, cap in hand, to give them a fitting greeting. In such a situation politeness amounted to heroism; but it has always been supposed that Laugeron was in some way connected with the conspiracy. He at once invited Maurice and the abbe to take some refreshments, doing so in such a way as to make them understand that he was anxious to speak to them in private. Thanks to one of the Duc de Sairmeuse's valets who frequented the house, the landlord knew as much as the authorities; and, indeed, he knew even more, since he had also received information from several rebels who had escaped capture. He conducted Maurice and the abbe to a room looking on to the back of the house, where he knew they would be secure from observation, and then it was that they obtained their first positive information. In the first place, nothing had been heard either of Lacheneur or his son Jean, who had so far eluded all pursuit. Secondly, there were, at that moment, no fewer than two hundred prisoners in the citadel, including both the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau. And finally, that very morning there had been at least sixty additional arrests in Montaignac. It was generally supposed that these arrests were due to traitorous denunciations, and all the inhabitants were trembling with fear. M. Laugeron knew the real cause, however, for it had been confided to him under pledge of secrecy by his customer, the duke's valet. "It certainly seems an incredible story, gentlemen," he remarked; "but yet it is quite true. Two officers, belonging to the Montaignac militia, were returning from the expedition this morning at daybreak, when on passing the

Croix d'Arcy they perceived a man, wearing the uniform of the emperor's bodyguard, lying dead in a ditch. Not unnaturally they examined the body, and to their great astonishment they found a slip of paper between the man's clenched teeth. It proved to be a list of Montaignac conspirators, which this old soldier, finding himself mortally wounded, had endeavored to destroy; but the agonies of death had prevented him from swallowing it—"

The abbe and Maurice had no time to listen to the general news the landlord might have to impart. They requested him to procure a messenger, who was at once despatched to Escorval, so that the baroness and Marie-Anne might be made acquainted with the information they had obtained concerning both the baron and Lacheneur. They then left the hotel and hastened to the house occupied by the Duc de Sairmeuse. There was a crowd at the door; a crowd of a hundred persons or so—men with anxious faces, women in tears—all of them begging for an audience. These were the friends and relatives of the unfortunate men who had been arrested. Two footmen, wearing gorgeous liveries, of haughty mien, stood in the doorway, their time being fully occupied in keeping back the struggling throng. Hoping that his priestly dress would win him a hearing, the Abbe Midon approached and gave his name. But he was repulsed like the others. "M. le Duc is busy, and can receive nobody," said one of the servants. "M. le Duc is preparing his report to his majesty." And in support of his assertion he pointed to the horses standing saddled in the courtyard, and waiting for the couriers who were to carry the despatches.

The priest sadly rejoined his companions. "We must wait!' said he. And yet, intentionally or not, the servants were deceiving these poor people, for just then the duke was in no wise troubling himself about his despatches. In point of fact, he happened to be engaged in a violent altercation with the Marquis de Courtornieu. Each of these noble personages wa anxious to play the leading part—that which would meet with the highest reward at the hands of the supreme authorities at Paris. This quarrel had begun on some petty point, but soon they both lost their tempers, and stinging words, bitter allusions, and even threats were rapidly exchanged. The marquis declared it necessary to inflict the most frightful, he said the most *salutary,* punishment upon the offenders; while the duke,

on the contrary, was inclined to be indulgent. The marquis opined that since Lacheneur, the prime mover, and his son, had both eluded pursuit, it was absolutely requisite that Marie-Anne should be arrested. M. de Sairmeuse, however, would not listen to the suggestion. To his mind it would be most impolitic to arrest this young girl. Such a course would render the authorities odious, and would exasperate all the rebels who were still at large.

"These men must be put down with a strong hand!" urged M. de Courtornieu.

"I don't wish to exasperate the populace," replied the duke.

"Bah! what does public sentiment matter?"

"It matters a great deal when you can not depend upon your soldiers. Do you know what happened last night? There was enough powder burned to win a battle, and yet there were only fifteen peasants wounded. Our men fired in the air. You forget that the Montaignac Corps is for the most part composed of men who formerly fought under Bonaparte, and who are burning to turn their weapons against us."

Thus did the dispute continue, ostensibly for motives of public policy, though, in reality, both the duke and the marquis had a secret reason for their obstinacy. Blanche de Courtornieu had reached Montaignac that morning and had confided her anxiety and her sufferings to her father, with the result that she had made him swear to profit by this opportunity to rid her of Marie-Anne. On his side, the duke was convinced that Marie-Anne was his son's mistress, and wished, at any cost, to prevent her appearance at the tribunal. Finding that words had no influence whatever on his coadjutor, his grace at last finished the dispute by a skilful stratagem. "As we are of different opinions we can't possibly work together," quoth he; "we are one too many." And speaking in this fashion he glanced so meaningly at a pair of pistols that the noble marquis felt a disagreeable chilliness creep up his spine. He had never been noted for bravery, and did not in the least relish the idea of having a bullet lodged in his brains. Accordingly he waived his proposal, and eventually agreed to go to the citadel with the duke to inspect the prisoners.

The whole day passed by without M. de Sairmeuse consenting to give a single audience, and Maurice spent his time in watching the moving arms of the semaphore perched on the

tall keep-tower. "What orders are traveling through space?" he said to the abbe. "Are these messages of life or death?"

The messenger despatched from the Hotel de France had been instructed to make haste, and yet he did not reach Escorval until nightfall. Beset by a thousand fears, he had taken the longest but less frequented roads, and had made numerous circuits to avoid the people he had seen approaching in the distance. Scarcely had the baroness read the letter written to her by Maurice than, turning to Marie-Anne, she exclaimed: "We must go to Montaignac at once!"

But this was easier said than done, for they only kept three horses at Escorval. The one which had been harnessed to the cabriolet the preceding night was lame—indeed, nearly dead; while the other two had been taken to Montaignac that morning by Maurice and the priest. What were the ladies to do? They appealed to some neighbors for assistance, but the latter, having heard of the baron's arrest, firmly refused to lend a horse, believing they should gravely compromise themselves if they in any way helped the wife of a man charged with such grievous offenses as high treason and revolt. Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne were talking of making the journey on foot when Corporal Bavois, still left on guard at the chateau, swore by the sacred name of thunder that this should not be. He hurried off with his two men, and, after a brief absence, returned leading an old plow-horse by the mane. He had, more or less forcibly, requisitioned this clumsy steed, which he harnessed to the cabriolet as best he could. This was not his only demonstration of good-will. His duties at the chateau were over now that M. d'Escorval had been arrested, and nothing remained for him but to rejoin his regiment. Accordingly he declared that he would not allow these ladies to travel unattended at night-time along a road where they might be exposed to many disagreeable encounters, but should escort them to their journey's end with his two subordinates. "And it will go hard with soldier or civilian who ventures to molest them, will it not, comrades?" he exclaimed.

As usual, his companions assented with an oath; and as Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne journeyed onward, they could perceive the three men preceding or following the vehicle, or oftener walking beside it. Not until they reached the gates of Montaignac did the old soldier forsake his protegees, and then not without bidding them a respectful farewell, in his

own name and that of his subordinates, adding that if they had need of his services they had only to call upon Bavois, corporal of grenadiers in Company No. I, stationed at the citadel.

The clocks were striking half-past ten when Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne alighted at the Hotel de France. They found Maurice in despair, and even the abbe disheartened, for since the morning events had progressed with fearful rapidity. The semaphore signals were now explained; orders had come from Paris; and there they could be read in black and white, affixed to the walls of the town. "Montaignac must be regarded as in a state of siege. The military authorities have been granted discretionary powers. A military commission will exercise jurisdiction in lieu of all other courts. Let peaceable citizens take courage; let the evil-disposed tremble! As for the rabble, the sword of the law is about to strike!" Only six lines in all—but each word fraught with menace!

The abbe most regretted that trial before a military commission had been substituted for the customary court-martial. Indeed this upset all the plans he had devised in the hope of saving his friend. A court-martial is, of course, hasty and often unjust in its decisions; but still it observes some of the forms of procedure practised in judicial tribunals. It still retains some of the impartiality of legal justice, which asks to be enlightened before condemning. But the military commission now to be appointed would naturally neglect all legal forms, and the prisoners would be summarily condemned and punished after the fashion in which spies are treated in time of war.

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "would they dare to condemn without investigating, without listening to testimony, without allowing the prisoners time to prepare their defense?" The abbe remained silent. The turn events had taken exceeded his worst apprehensions. Now, indeed, he believed that anything was possible.

Maurice had spoken of investigation. Investigation, if such it could be called, had indeed begun that very day, and was still continuing by the light of a jailer's lantern. That is to say, the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were passing the prisoners in review. They now numbered three hundred, and the duke and his companion had decided to begin by summoning before the commission thirty of the most dangerous conspirators. How were they to select them? By

what method could they hope to discover the extent of each prisoner's guilt? It would have been difficult for them to explain the course they took. They simply went from one man to another, asking any question that entered their minds, and when the terrified captive had answered them they either said to the head jailer, "Keep this one until another time," or "This one for to-morrow," their decision being guided by the impression the man's language and demeanor had created. By daylight they had thirty names upon their list, at the head of which figured those of the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau.

Although the unhappy party at the Hotel de France were not aware of this circumstance, they passed a sleepless, anxious night; and it was relief, indeed, when the daylight peered through the windows and the reveille could be heard beating at the citadel; for now at least they might renew their efforts. The abbe intimated his intention of going alone to the duke's house, declaring that he would find a way to force an entrance. He had just bathed his red and swollen eyes in fresh water, and was preparing to start, when a rap was heard at the door. Directly afterward M. Laugeron, the landlord, entered the room. His face betokened some dreadful misfortune; and indeed he had just been made acquainted with the composition of the military commission. In defiance of all equity and justice, the presidency of this tribunal of vengeance had been offered to the Duc de Sairmeuse, who had unblushingly accepted it—he who was at the same time both witness and executioner. Moreover, he was to be assisted by other officers hitherto placed under his immediate orders.

"And when does the commission enter upon its functions?" inquired the abbe.

"To-day," replied the host, hesitatingly; "this morning—in an hour—perhaps sooner!"

The priest understood well enough what M. Laugeron meant, but what he dared not say: "The commission is assembling, make haste." "Come!" said the Abbe Midon, turning to Maurice, "I wish to be present when your father is examined."

The baroness would have given anything to accompany the priest and her son, but this could not be; she understood it and submitted. As Maurice and his companion stepped into the street they saw a soldier a short distance off who made a friendly gesture. Recognizing Corporal Bavois, they paused instinctively. But he, now passing them by with an air of the

utmost indifference, and apparently without observing them, hastily exclaimed: "I have seen Chanlouineau. Be of good cheer: he promises to save the baron!"

XVII

WITHIN the limits of the citadel of Montaignac stands an old building known as the chapel. Originally consecrated to purposes of worship, this structure had at the time of which we write fallen into disuse. It was so damp that it could not even be utilized for storage purposes, and yet this was the place selected by the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu for the assembling of the military commission. When Maurice and the abbe entered this gloomy building they found that the proceedings had not yet commenced. The little trouble taken to transform the old chapel into a hall of justice impressed them sadly, for it testified beyond power of mistake to the precipitation of the judges, and revealed their determination to carry out the work of vengeance without either delay or mercy. Three large tables taken from a soldier's mess-room, and covered with horse blankets instead of baize, stood on a raised platform formerly occupied by the chief altar. Behind these tables were ranged a few rush-seated chairs, waiting the president's assessors, and in the midst glittered a richly carved and gilt armchair, which his grace had had sent from his own house for his personal accommodation. In front of the tables three or four long wooden benches had been placed in readiness for the prisoners, while several strong ropes were stretched from one wall to the other, so as to divide the chapel into two parts and allow considerable room for the public. This last precaution had proved quite superfluous, for, contrary to expectation, there were not twenty persons in the building. Prominent among these were ten or twelve men of martial mien, but clad in civilian attire. Their scarred and weather-beaten features testified to many an arduous campaign fought in imperial times; and indeed they had all served Napoleon—this one as a lieutenant, that other as a captain—but the

Restoration had dismissed them with scanty pensions and given their well-earned commissions to cadets of the old nobility. Their pale faces and the sullen fire gleaming in their eyes showed plainly enough what they thought of the Duc de Sairmeuse's proceedings. In addition to these retired officers there were three men dressed in professional black, who stood conversing in low tones near the chapel door; while in a corner one could perceive several peasant women with their aprons thrown over their faces; they were the mothers, wives, and daughters of some of the imprisoned rebels. Save for their constant sobs the silence would have been well-nigh undisturbed.

Nine o'clock had just struck when a rolling of drums shook the window-panes; a loud voice was heard outside exclaiming, "Present arms!" and then the members of the commission entered, followed by the Marquis de Courtornieu and various civil functionaries. The Duc de Sairmeuse was in full uniform, his face rather more flushed, and his air a trifle more haughty, than usual. "The sitting is open!" he announced, and adding in a rough voice: "Bring in the culprits."

They came in, one by one, to the number of thirty, and sat themselves down an the benches at the foot of the platform. Chanlouineau held his head proudly erect, and looked about him with an air of great composure. The Baron d'Escorval was calm and grave; but not more so than when, in days gone by, he had been called upon to express his opinion in the councils of the empire. Both of them perceived Maurice, who was so overcome that he had to lean upon the abbe for support. But while the baron greeted his son with a simple bend of the head, Chanlouineau made a gesture that clearly signified: "Have confidence in me—fear nothing." The attitude of the other prisoners indicated surprise rather than fear. Perhaps they were unconscious of the peril they had braved, and the extent of the danger that now threatened them.

When the prisoners had taken their places, a colonel who filled the office of commissary for the prosecution rose to his feet. His presentation of the case was violent but brief. He narrated a few leading facts, exalted the merits of the government of his majesty King Louis XVIII, and concluded by demanding that sentence of death should be pronounced upon the culprits. When he had ceased speaking, the duke rudely bade the first prisoner on the nearest bench to stand up and give his name, age, and profession.

"Eugene Michel Chanlouineau," was the reply; "aged twenty-nine, a farmer by occupation."

"An owner of national lands, probably?"

"The owner of lands which, having been paid for with good money and made fertile by my own labor, are rightfully mine."

The duke did not wish to waste time in useless discussion. "You took part in this rebellion?" he asked; and receiving an affirmative reply, pursued: "You are right in confessing, for witnesses will be introduced who will prove this fact conclusively."

Five grenadiers entered—the same that Chanlouineau held at bay while Maurice, the abbe, and Marie-Anne were getting into the cabriolet near the cross-roads. They, all of them, declared upon oath that they recognized the prisoner; and one of them even went so far as to say he was a solid fellow of remarkable courage. During this evidence Chanlouineau's eyes betrayed an agony of anxiety. Would the soldiers allude to the circumstance of the cabriolet and Marie-Anne's escape? Perhaps they might have done so had not the Duc de Sairmeuse abruptly stated that as the prisoner confessed he had heard quite enough.

"What were your motives in fomenting this outbreak?" asked his grace, turning to Chanlouineau.

"We hoped to free ourselves from a government brought back by foreign bayonets; to free ourselves from the insolence of the nobility, and to retain the lands that are justly ours."

"Enough! You were one of the leaders of the revolt?"

"One of the leaders—yes."

"Who were the others?"

A faint smile flitted over the young farmer's lips as he replied: "The others were M. Lacheneur, his son Jean, and the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The duke bounded from his carved armchair. "You wretch! you rascal! you vile scoundrel!" he exclaimed, catching up a heavy inkstand that stood on the table before him. Every one supposed that he was about to hurl it at the prisoner's head.

But Chanlouineau stood perfectly unmoved in the midst of the assembly, which had been excited to the highest pitch by his startling declaration. "You questioned me," he resumed, "and I replied. You may gag me if my answers don't please you. If there were witnesses *for* me as there are against me, I could prove the truth of what I say. As it is, all the pris-

oners here will tell you that I am speaking the truth. Is it not so, you others?"

With the exception of the Baron d'Escorval, there was not one of the other prisoners who was capable of understanding the real bearing of these audacious allegations; nevertheless, they all nodded assent.

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse was so truly our leader," exclaimed the daring peasant, "that he was wounded by a sabre-thrust while fighting by my side."

The duke's face was as purple as if he had been struck with apoplexy; and his fury almost deprived him of the power of speech. "You lie, scoundrel! you lie!" he gasped.

"Send for the marquis," said Chanlouineau quietly, "and see whether he's wounded or not."

A refusal on the duke's part was bound to arouse suspicion. But what could he do? Martial had concealed his wound on the previous day, and it was now impossible to confess that he had been wounded. Fortunately for his grace, one of the commissioners relieved him of his embarrassment. "I hope, sir," he said, "that you will not give this arrogant rebel the satisfaction he desires. The commission opposes his demand."

"Very naturally," retorted Chanlouineau. "To-morrow my head will be off, and you think nothing will then remain to prove what I say. But, fortunately, I have other proof—material and indestructible proof—which it is beyond your power to destroy, and which will speak when my body is six feet under ground."

"What is this proof?" asked another commissioner, on whom the duke looked askance.

The prisoner shook his head. "You shall have it," he said, "when you promise me my life in exchange for it. It is now in the hands of a trusty person, who knows its value. It will go to the king if necessary. We should like to understand the part which the Marquis de Sairmeuse played in this affair—whether he was truly with us, or whether he was only an instigating agent."

A tribunal regardful of the simplest rules of justice, or even of its own honor, would have instantly required the Marquis de Sairmeuse's attendance. But the military commission considered such a course quite beneath its dignity. These men arrayed in glittering uniforms were not judges charged with the vindication of the law, but simply agents selected by the

conquerors to strike the conquered in virtue of that savage saying, "Wo to the vanquished!" The president, the noble Duc de Sairmeuse, would not have consented to summon Martial on any consideration. Nor did his associate judges wish him to do so. Had Chanlouineau foreseen this result? Probably he had; and yet, why had he ventured on so hazardous a course? The tribunal, after a short deliberation, decided that it would not admit this "unjustifiable" denunciation, which, while exciting the whole audience, had quite stupefied Maurice and the Abbe Midon.

The examination was continued, therefore, with increased bitterness. "Instead of designating imaginary leaders," resumed the duke, "you would do well to name the real instigator of this revolt—not Lacheneur, but an individual seated at the other end of the bench, the elder D'Escorval—"

"Monsieur le Baron d'Escorval was entirely ignorant of the conspiracy; I swear it by all that I hold most sacred—"

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted the emissary for the prosecution. "Instead of trying the patience of the commission with such ridiculous stories, you should endeavor to merit its indulgence."

Chanlouineau's glance and gesture expressed such disdain that his interrupter was abashed. "I wish for no indulgence," said the young farmer. "I have played my game and lost it; here is my head. But if you are not wild beasts you will take pity on the poor wretches who surround me. I see at least ten among them who were not our accomplices, and who certainly did not take up arms. Even the others did not know what they were doing."

With these words he resumed his seat, proud, indifferent, and apparently oblivious of the murmur which ran through the audience, the soldiers of the guard, and even to the platform, at the sound of his ringing voice. His appeal for clemency toward his fellow prisoners had reawakened the grief of the poor peasant women, whose sobs and moans now filled the hall. The retired officers had grown paler than before, and as they nervously pulled at their long mustaches they murmured among themselves, "That's a man, and no mistake!" Just then, moreover, the abbe leaned toward Maurice and whispered in his ear: "Chanlouineau evidently has some plan. He intends to save your father, though I don't at all understand how."

The judges were conversing with considerable animation,

although in an undertone. A difficulty had presented itself. The prisoners, ignorant of the charges which would be brought against them, and not expecting instant trial, had not thought of procuring defenders. And this circumstance, bitter mockery! caused great annoyance to this iniquitous tribunal, despite the complacency with which it was prepared to trample justice under foot. The commissioners had made up their minds, they had already determined on their verdict, and yet they wished to hear a voice raised in defense of those who were already doomed. It chanced that three lawyers, retained by the friends of a few prisoners, were in the hall. They were the three men whom Maurice had noticed conversing near the door when he entered the chapel. The duke was informed of their presence. He turned to them, and motioned them to approach; then, pointing to Chanlouineau, asked: "Will you undertake this culprit's defense?"

For a moment the lawyers hesitated. They were disgusted with these monstrous proceedings, and looked inquiringly at one another. "We are all disposed to undertake the prisoner's defense," at last replied the eldest of the three, "but we see him for the first time; we do not know what defense he can present. He must ask for a delay; it is indispensable, in order to confer with him."

"The court can grant you no delay," interrupted M. de Sairmeuse; "will you undertake his defense, yes or no?"

The advocate hesitated, not that he was afraid, for he was a brave man: but he was endeavoring to find some argument strong enough to turn these mock judges from the course on which they seemed bent. "I will speak on his behalf," said the advocate at last, "but not without first protesting with all my strength against these unheard-of modes of trial."

"Oh! spare us your homilies, and be brief."

After Chanlouineau's examination, it was difficult to improvise any plea for him, and especially so on the spur of the moment. Still, in his indignation, the courageous advocate managed to present a score of arguments which would have made any other tribunal reflect. But all the while he was speaking the Duc de Sairmeuse fidgeted in his armchair, with every sign of angry impatience. "Your speech was very long," he remarked when the lawyer had finished, "terribly long. We shall never get through with this business if each prisoner takes up as much time!"

He turned to his colleagues and proposed that they should unite all the cases, in fact try all the culprits in a body, with the exception of the elder d'Escorval. "This will shorten our task," said he, "and there will then be but two judgments to be pronounced. This will not, of course, prevent each individual from defending himself."

The lawyers protested against such a course; for a general judgment such as the duke suggested would destroy all hope of saving any one of these unfortunate men. "How can we defend them," pleaded one advocate, "when we know nothing of their precise situations; why, we do not even know their names. We shall be obliged to designate them by the cut of their coats or by the color of their hair."

They implored the tribunal to grant a week for preparation, four days, even twenty-four hours; but all their efforts were futile, for the president's proposition was adopted by his colleagues. Consequently each prisoner was called to the table, according to the place which he occupied on the different benches. Each man gave his name, age, dwelling place, and profession, and received an order to return to his seat. Six or seven of the prisoners were actually granted time to say that they were absolutely ignorant of the conspiracy, and that they had been arrested while conversing quietly on the public highway. They begged to be allowed to furnish proof of the truth of their assertions, and they invoked the testimony of the soldiers who had arrested them. M. d'Escorval, whose case had been separated from the others, was not summoned to the table. He would be examined last of all.

"Now the counsel for the defense will be heard," said the duke; "but make haste; lose no time, for it is already twelve o'clock."

Then began a shameful and revolting scene. The duke interrupted the lawyers every other moment, bidding them be silent, questioning them, or jeering at their arguments. "It seems incredible," said he, "that any one can think of defending such wretches!" Or again: "Silence! You should blush with shame for having constituted yourself the defender of such rascals!"

However, the advocates courageously persevered, even although they realized the utter futility of their efforts. But what could they do under such circumstances? The defense of these twenty-nine prisoners lasted only one hour and a half.

Before the last word was fairly uttered, the Duc de Sairmeuse

gave a sigh of relief, and in a tone which betrayed his inward delight, exclaimed: "Prisoner d'Escorval, stand up."

Thus called upon, the baron rose to his feet, calm and dignified. Terrible as his sufferings must have been, there was no trace of them on his noble face. He had even repressed the smile of disdain which the duke's paltry spite in not giving him the title he had a right to almost brought to his lips. But Chanlouineau sprang up at the same time, trembling with indignation, and his face all aglow with anger.

"Remain seated," ordered the duke, "or you shall be removed from the courtroom."

Despite this order the young farmer declared that he would speak: that he had some remarks to add to the plea made by the defending counsel. At a sign from the duke, two gendarmes approached him and placed their hands on his shoulders. He allowed them to force him back into his seat, though he could easily have crushed them with one blow of his brawny arm. An observer might have supposed that he was furious; but in reality he was delighted. He had attained the end he had in view. While standing he had been able to glance at the Abbe Midon, and the latter had plainly read in his eyes: "Whatever happens, watch over Maurice; restrain him. Do not allow him to defeat my plans by any outburst."

This caution was not unnecessary, for Maurice was terribly agitated; his sight failed him, his head swam, he felt that he was suffocating, that he was losing his reason. "Where is the self-control you promised me?" murmured the priest.

But no one observed the young man's condition. The attention of the audience was elsewhere, and the silence was so perfect that one could distinctly hear the measured tread of the sentinels pacing to and fro in the courtyard outside. It was plain to every one that the decisive moment for which the tribunal had reserved all its attention and efforts had now arrived. The conviction and condemnation of the poor peasants were, after all, mere trifles; otherwise, indeed, was the task of humbling a prominent statesman, who had been the emperor's faithful friend and counselor. Seldom could circumstances offer so splendid an opportunity to satisfy the cravings of royalist prejudice and ambition; and the Duc de Sairmeuse and his colleagues had fully determined not to allow it to slip by. If they had acted informally in the case of the obscure conspirators, they had carefully prepared their suit against the

baron. Thanks to the activity of the Marquis de Courtornieu, the prosecution had found no fewer than seven charges against him, the least notable of which was alone punishable with death. "Which of you," asked the president, turning to the lawyers, "will consent to defend this great culprit?"

"I!" exclaimed the three advocates all in one breath.

"Take care," said the duke, with a malicious smile; "the task may prove a difficult one."

"Difficult, indeed!" It would have been better to have said dangerous, for the defender risked his career, his peace, his liberty, and very probably—his life.

"Our profession has its exigencies," nobly replied the oldest of the advocates. And then the two courageously took their places beside the baron, thus avenging the honor of their robe.

"Prisoner," resumed M. de Sairmeuse, "state your name and profession."

"Louis Guillaume, Baron d'Escorval, Commander of the Order of the Legion of Honor, formerly Councilor of State under the Empire."

"So you avow these shameful services? You confess—"

"Excuse me; I am proud of having had the honor of serving my country, and of being useful to her in proportion to my abilities—"

"Ah, ha! very good indeed!" interrupted the duke with a furious gesture. "These gentlemen, my fellow commissioners, will appreciate those words of yours. No doubt it was in the hope of regaining your former position that you entered into this shameful conspiracy against a magnanimous prince."

"You know as well as I do myself, sir, that I have had no hand in this conspiracy."

"Why, you were arrested in the ranks of the conspirators with weapons in your hands!"

"I was unarmed, as you are well aware; and if I was among the peasantry, it was only because I hoped to induce them to relinquish their senseless enterprise."

"You lie!"

The baron paled beneath the insult, but he made no response. There was, however, one man in the assemblage who could no longer endure such abominable injustice, and this was the Abbe Midon, who only a moment before had advised Maurice to remain calm. Abruptly leaving his place, he advanced to the foot of the platform.

"The Baron d'Escorval speaks the truth," he cried in a ringing voice: "as each of the three hundred prisoners in the citadel will swear. Those who are here would say the same, even if they stood upon the guillotine; and I, who accompanied him, who walked beside him, I, a priest, swear before the God who one day will judge us all, Monsieur de Sairmeuse, I swear we did everything that was humanly possible to do to arrest this movement!"

The duke listened with an ironical smile. "I was not deceived, then," he answered, "when I was told that this army of rebels had a chaplain! Ah! sir, you should sink to the earth with shame. What! You, a priest, mingle with such scoundrels as these—with these enemies of our good king and of our holy religion! Do not deny it! Your haggard features, your swollen eyes, your disordered attire, plainly betray your guilt. Must I, a soldier, remind you of what is due to your sacred calling? Hold your peace, sir, and depart!"

But the prisoner's advocates were on their feet. "We demand," cried they, "we demand that this witness be heard. He must be heard! Military commissions are not above the laws that regulate ordinary tribunals."

"If I do not speak the truth," resumed the abbe, "I am a perjured witness—worse yet, an accomplice. It is your duty, in that case, to have me arrested."

The duke's face assumed a look of hypocritical compassion. "No, Monsieur le Cure," said he, "I shall not arrest you. I wish to avert the scandal which you are trying to cause. We will show your priestly garb the respect the wearer does not deserve. Again, and for the last time, retire, or I shall be obliged to employ force."

What would further resistance avail? Nothing. The abbe, with a face whiter than the plastered walls, and eyes filled with tears, returned to his place beside Maurice.

In the mean while, the advocates were protesting with increasing energy. But the duke, hammering on the table with both fists, at last succeeded in reducing them to silence. "Ah! you want evidence!" he exclaimed. "Very well then, you shall have it. Soldiers, bring in the first witness."

There was some little movement among the guards, and then Father Chupin made his appearance. He advanced with a deliberate step, but his restless, shrinking eyes showed plainly enough that he was ill at ease. And there was a very per-

ceptible tremor in his voice when, with hand uplifted, he swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"What do you know concerning the prisoner D'Escorval?" asked the duke.

"I know that he took part in the rising the other night."

"Are you sure of this?"

"I can furnish proofs."

"Submit them to the consideration of the commission."

The old scoundrel began to grow more confident. "First of all," he replied, "directly Lacheneur had given up your grace's family estates, much against his will, he hastened to M. d'Escorval's house, where he met Chanlouineau. It was then that they plotted this insurrection between them."

"I was Lacheneur's friend," observed the baron; "and it was perfectly natural that he should come to me for consolation after a great misfortune."

M. de Sairmeuse turned to his colleagues. "Do you hear that!" said he. "This D'Escorval calls the restitution of a deposit a great misfortune! Proceed, witness."

"In the second place," resumed Chupin, "M. d'Escorval was always prowling round about Lacheneur's house."

"That's false," interrupted the baron. "I never visited the house but once, and on that occasion I implored him to renounce—" He paused, understanding only when it was too late the terrible significance of these few words. However, having begun, he would not retract, but calmly added: "I implored him to renounce all idea of provoking an insurrection."

"Ah! then you knew of his infamous intentions?"

"I suspected them."

"At all events you must be perfectly well aware that the fact of not revealing this conspiracy made you an accomplice, which implies the guillotine."

The Baron d'Escorval had just signed his death-warrant. How strange is destiny! He was innocent, and yet he was the only one among all the prisoners whom a regular tribunal could have legally condemned. Maurice and the abbe were overcome with grief; but Chanlouineau, who turned toward them, had still the same smile of confidence on his lips. How could he hope when all hope seemed absolutely lost?

The commissioners made no attempt to conceal their satisfaction, and M. de Sairmeuse, especially, evinced an indecent

joy. "Ah, well! gentlemen, what do you say to that?" he remarked to the lawyers in a sneering tone.

The counsel for the defense were unable to conceal their discouragement; though they still endeavored to question the validity of their client's declaration. He had said that he *suspected* the conspiracy, not that he *knew* of it, which was a very different thing.

"Say at once that you wish for still more overwhelming testimony," interrupted the duke. "Very well! You shall have it. Continue your evidence, witness."

"The prisoner," continued Chupin, "was present at all the conferences held at Lacheneur's house; and having to cross the Oiselle each time, and fearing lest the ferryman might speak about his frequent nocturnal journeys, he had an old boat repaired, which he had not used for years."

"Ah! that's a remarkable circumstance, prisoner; do you recollect having your boat repaired?"

"Yes; but not for the purpose this man mentions."

"For what purpose, then?"

The baron made no reply. Was it not in compliance with Maurice's request that this boat had been put in order?

"And finally," continued Chupin, "when Lacheneur set fire to his house as a signal for the insurrection, the prisoner was with him."

"That," exclaimed the duke, "is conclusive evidence."

"Yes, I was at La Reche," interrupted the baron; "but, as I have already told you, it was with the firm determination of preventing this outbreak."

M. de Sairmeuse laughed disdainfully. "Ah, gentlemen!" he said, addressing his fellow commissioners, "you see that the prisoner's courage does not equal his depravity. But I will confound him. What did you do, prisoner, when the insurgents left La Reche?"

"I returned home with all possible speed, took a horse and hastened to the Croix d'Arcy."

"Then you knew that this was to be the general meeting place?"

"Lacheneur had just informed me of it."

"Even if I believed your story," retorted the duke, "I should have to remind you that your duty was to have hastened to Montaignac and informed the authorities. But what you say is untrue. You did not leave Lacheneur, you accompanied him."

"No, sir, no!"

"And what if I could prove that you did so beyond all question?"

"Impossible, since such was not the case."

By the malicious satisfaction that sparkled in M. de Sairmeuse's eyes, the Abbe Midon divined that he had some terrible weapon in reserve, and that he was about to overwhelm the Baron d'Escorval with false evidence, or fatal coincidence, which would place Maurice's father beyond all possibility of being saved. At a sign from the commissary for the prosecution the Marquis de Courtornieu now left his seat and advanced to the front of the platform. "I must request you, Monsieur le Marquis," said the duke, "to be kind enough to read us the statement your daughter has prepared and signed."

This scene had evidently been prepared beforehand. M. de Courtornieu cleared his glasses, produced a paper which he slowly unfolded, and then amid a death-like silence, emphatically read as follows: "I, Blanche de Courtornieu, do declare upon oath that, on the evening of the 4th of March, between ten and eleven o'clock, on the public road leading from Sairmeuse to Montaignac, I was assailed by a band of armed brigands. While they were deliberating as to whether they should take possession of my person and pillage my carriage, I overheard one of them say to another, speaking of me: 'She must get out, must she not, M. d'Escorval?' I believe that the brigand who uttered these words was a peasant named Chanlouineau, but I can not assert this on oath."

At this moment a loud cry of anguish abruptly interrupted the marquis's perusal. The trial was too great for Maurice's reason, and if the Abbe Midon had not restrained him, he would have sprung forward and exclaimed: "It was to me, not to my father, that Chanlouineau addressed those words. I alone am guilty; my father is innocent!" But fortunately the abbe had sufficient presence of mind to hold the young fellow back and place his hand before his mouth. One or two of the retired officers standing near also tendered their help and, probably divining the truth, seized hold of Maurice, and despite all his attempts at resistance carried him from the room by main force. The whole incident scarcely occupied ten seconds.

"What is the cause of this disturbance?" asked the duke, looking angrily at the spectators, none of whom uttered a word. "At the least noise the hall shall be cleared," added his grace.

"And you, prisoner, what have you to say in self-justification after Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's crushing evidence?"

"Nothing," murmured the baron.

But to return to Maurice. Once outside the courtroom, the Abbe Midon confided him to the care of the three officers, who promised to go with him, to carry him by main force, if need be, to the Hotel de France, and keep him there. Relieved on this score, the priest reentered the hall just in time to see the baron reseat himself without replying to M. de Sairmeuse's final sneer, that by leaving Mademoiselle Blanche's testimony unchallenged, M. d'Escorval had virtually confessed his guilt. But then, in truth, how could he have challenged it? How could he defend himself without betraying his son? Until this moment every one present had believed in the baron's innocence. Could it be that he was guilty? His silence seemed to imply that such was the case; and this alone was a sufficient triumph for the Duc de Sairmeuse and his friends. His grace now turned to the lawyers, and, with an air of weariness and disdain, remarked: "At present you may speak, since it is absolutely necessary; but no long phrases, mind! we ought to have finished here an hour ago."

The eldest of the three advocates rose, trembling with indignation, and prepared to dare anything for the sake of giving free utterance to his thoughts, but before a word was spoken the baron hastily checked him. "Do not try to defend me," he said calmly; "it would be labor wasted. I have only one word to say to my judges. Let them remember what noble Marshal Moncey wrote to the king: "The scaffold does not make friends."

But this reminder was not of a nature to soften the judges' hearts. For that very phrase the marshal had been deprived of his office and condemned to three months' imprisonment. As the advocates made no further attempt to argue the case, the commission retired to deliberate. This gave M. d'Escorval an opportunity to speak with his defenders. He shook them warmly by the hand, and thanked them for their courage and devotion. Then drawing the eldest among them on one side, he quickly added in a low voice: "I have a last favor to ask of you. When sentence of death has been pronounced upon me, go at once to my son. Say to him that his dying father commands him to live—he will understand you. Tell him that it is my last wish; that he live—live for his mother!"

He said no more; the judges were returning. Of the thirty

prisoners, nine were declared not guilty, and released. The remaining twenty-one, including both M. d'Escorval and Chanlouineau, were then formally condemned to death. But Chanlouineau's lips still retained their enigmatical smile.

XVIII

THE three military men to whose care the Abbe Midon had entrusted Maurice had considerable difficulty in getting him to the Hotel de France, for he made continual attempts to return to the courtroom, having the fallacious idea that by telling the truth he might yet save his father. In point of fact, however, the only effect of his confession would have been to provide the Duc de Sairmeuse with another welcome victim. When he and his custodians at length entered the room where Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne were waiting in cruel suspense, the baroness eagerly asked whether the trial were over.

"Nothing is decided yet," replied one of the retired officers. "The cure will come here as soon as the verdict is given."

Then as the three military men had promised not to lose sight of Maurice, they sat themselves down in gloomy silence. Not the slightest stir could be heard in the hotel, which seemed indeed as if it were deserted. At last, a little before four o'clock, the abbe came in, followed by the lawyer, to whom the baron had confided his last wishes.

"My husband!" exclaimed Madame d'Escorval, springing wildly from her chair. The priest bowed his head. "Death!" she faltered, fully understanding the significance of this impressive gesture. "What? they have condemned him!" And overcome with the terrible blow, she sank back, with hanging arms. But this weakness did not last long. "We must save him!" she exclaimed, abruptly springing to her feet again, her eyes bright with some sudden resolution, "we must wrest him from the scaffold. Up, Maurice! up, Marie-Anne! No more lamentations. To work! You also, gentlemen, will assist me; and I can count on your help, Monsieur le Cure. I do not quite know how to begin, but something must be done. The

murder of so good, so noble a man as he would be too great a crime. God will not permit it." She paused, with clasped hands, as if seeking for inspiration. "And the king," she resumed—"can the king consent to such a crime? No. A king can refuse mercy, but he can not refuse justice. I will go to him. I will tell him everything. Ah! why didn't this thought occur to me sooner? We must start for Paris without losing an instant. Maurice, you must accompany me; and one of you gentlemen go at once and order post-horses." Then, thinking they would obey her, she hastened into the next room to make preparations for her journey.

"Poor woman!" whispered the lawyer to the abbe, "she does not know that the sentence of a military commission is executed in twenty-four hours, and that it requires four days to make the journey to Paris." He reflected a moment, and then added: "But, after all, to let her go would be an act of mercy. Did not Ney, on the morning of his execution, implore the king to order the removal of his wife, who was sobbing and moaning in his cell?"

The abbe shook his head. "No," said he; "Madame d'Escorval would never forgive us if we prevented her from receiving her husband's last farewell."

At that very moment the baroness reentered the room, and the priest was trying to gather sufficient courage to tell her the cruel truth when a loud knock was heard at the door. One of the retired officers went to open it, and our old friend Bavois, the corporal of grenadiers, entered, raising his right hand to his cap, as if he were in his captain's presence. "Is Mademoiselle Lacheneur here?" he asked.

Marie-Anne stepped forward. "I am she, sir," she replied; "what do you want with me?"

"I am ordered to conduct you to the citadel, mademoiselle."

"What?" exclaimed Maurice, in a tone of anger; "so they imprison women as well?"

The worthy corporal struck his forehead with his open hand. "I am an old fool!" he exclaimed, "and don't know how to express myself. I meant to say that I came to fetch mademoiselle at the request of one of the prisoners, a man named Chanlouineau, who wishes to speak with her."

"Impossible, my good fellow," said one of the officers; "they would not allow this lady to visit one of the prisoners without special permission—"

"Well, she has this permission," said the old soldier. And then persuaded he had nothing to fear from any one present, he added in lower tones: "This Chanlouineau told me that the cure would understand his reasons."

Had the brave peasant really found some means of salvation? The abbe almost began to believe that such was the case. "You must go with this worthy fellow, Marie-Anne," said he.

The poor girl shuddered at the thought of seeing Chanlouineau again, but the idea of refusing never once occurred to her. "Let me go," she said quietly.

But the corporal did not budge. Winking in a desperate fashion, as was his wont whenever he wished to attract attention, he exclaimed: "Wait a bit. I've something else to tell you. This Chanlouineau, who seems to be a shrewd fellow, told me to say that all was going well. May I be hung if I can see how! Still such is his opinion. He also told me to tell you not to stir from this place, and not to attempt anything until mademoiselle comes back again, which will be in less than an hour. He swears that he will keep his promise, and only asks you to pledge your word that you will obey him—"

"We will wait for an hour," replied the abbe. "I can promise that—"

"Then that'll do," rejoined Bavois. "Salute, company. And now, mademoiselle, on the double-quick march! The poor devil over there must be on coals of fire."

That a condemned conspirator should be allowed to receive a visit from his leader's daughter—from the daughter of that Lacheneur who had succeeded in making his escape—was indeed surprising. But Chanlouineau had been ingenious enough to discover a means of procuring this special permission; and with this aim in view he had feigned the most abject terror on hearing the sentence of death passed upon him. He even contrived to weep in a bellowing fashion, and the guards could scarcely believe their eyes when they saw this robust young fellow, so insolent and defiant a few hours before, now utterly overcome, and even unable to walk back to his cell. They had to carry him there, and then his lamentations became still more boisterous, concluding with an urgent prayer that one of the guard should go to the Duc de Sairmeuse, or the Marquis de Courtornieu, and tell them he had revelations of the greatest importance to make.

That potent word "revelations" made M. de Courtornieu

hasten to the prisoner's cell. He found Chanlouineau on his knees, his features distorted by what appeared to be an agony of fear. The crafty fellow dragged himself toward the marquis, took hold of his hands and kissed them, imploring mercy and forgiveness, and swearing that to save his own life he was ready to do anything, yes, anything, even to deliver Lacheneur up to the authorities. Such a prospect had powerful attractions for the Marquis de Courtornieu. "Do you know, then, where this brigand is concealed?" he asked.

Chanlouineau admitted that he did not know, but declared that Marie-Anne, Lacheneur's daughter, was well acquainted with her father's hiding-place. She had, he said, perfect confidence in him, Chanlouineau; and if they would only send for her, and allow him ten minutes' private conversation with her, he was positive he could ascertain where the leader of the insurrection was concealed. So the bargain was quickly concluded; and Chanlouineau's life was promised him in exchange for Lacheneur's. A soldier, who fortunately chanced to be Corporal Bavois, was then sent to summon Marie-Anne; and the young farmer awaited her coming with feelings of poignant anxiety. He loved her, remember, and the thought of seeing her once more—for the last time on earth—made his heart throb wildly with mingled passion and despair. At last, at the end of the corridor, he could hear footsteps approaching. The heavy bolts securing the entrance to his cell were drawn back, the door opened, and Marie-Anne appeared, accompanied by Corporal Bavois. "M. de Courtornieu promised me that we should be left alone!" exclaimed Chanlouineau.

"Yes, I know he did, and I am going," replied the old soldier. "But I have orders to return for mademoiselle in half an hour."

When the door closed behind the worthy corporal, Chanlouineau took hold of Marie-Anne's hand and drew her to the tiny grated window. "Thank you for coming," said he, "thank you. I can see you and speak to you once more. Now that my hours are numbered, I may reveal the secret of my soul and of my life. Now, I can venture to tell you how ardently I have loved you—how much I still love you."

Involuntarily Marie-Anne drew away her hand and stepped back; for this outburst of passion, at such a moment and in such a place, seemed at once unspeakably sad and shocking.

"Have I, then, offended you?" asked Chanlouineau sadly.

"Forgive me—for I am about to die! You can not refuse to listen to the voice of one who, to-morrow, will vanish from earth forever. I have loved you for a long time, Marie-Anne, for more than six years. Before I saw you I only cared for my belongings, and to raise fine crops and gather money together seemed to me the greatest possible happiness here below. And when at first I did meet you—you were so high, and I so low, that in my wildest dreams I did not dare to aspire to you. I went to the church each Sunday only that I might worship you as peasant women worship the Virgin; I went home with my eyes and heart full of you—and that was all. But then came your father's misfortunes, which brought us nearer to each other; and your father made me as insane, yes, as insane as himself. After the insults he received from the Duc de Sairmeuse, M. Lacheneur resolved to revenge himself upon all these arrogant nobles, and selected me for his accomplice. He had read my heart as easily as if it had been an open book; and when we left the baron's house that Sunday evening, we both have such good reason to remember, he said to me: 'You love my daughter, my boy. Very well, assist me, and I promise you that if we succeed she shall be your wife. Only,' he added, 'I must warn you that you risk your life.' But what was life in comparison with the hopes that dazzled me? From that night I gave body, soul, and fortune to his cause. Others were influenced by hatred or ambition, but I was actuated by neither of these motives. What did the quarrels of these great folks matter to me—a simple laborer? I knew that the greatest were powerless to give my crops a drop of rain in seasons of drought or a ray of sunshine during long spells of rain. I took part in the conspiracy, it was because I loved you—"

It seemed to Marie-Anne that he was reproaching her for the deception she had been forced to practise, and for the cruel fate to which Lacheneur's wild designs had brought him. "Ah, you are cruel," she cried, "you are pitiless!"

But Chanlouineau scarcely heard her words. All the bitterness of the past was rising to his brain like fumes of alcohol; and he was scarcely conscious of what he said himself. "However, the day soon came," he continued, "when my foolish illusions were destroyed. You could not be mine since you belonged to another. I might have broken my compact! I thought of doing so, but I did not have the courage. To see you, to hear your voice, to spend my time under the same roof as you, was

happiness enough. I longed to see you happy and honored; I fought for the triumph of another, for him you had chosen—" A sob rose in his throat and choked his utterance; he buried his face in his hands to hide his tears, and for a moment seemed completely overcome. But he mastered his weakness after a brief interval, and in a firm voice exclaimed: "We must not linger any longer over the past. Time flies, and the future is ominous."

As he spoke he went to the door and applied first his eyes and then his ear to the grating, to see that there were no spies outside. But he could perceive no one, nor could he hear a sound. He came back to Marie-Anne's side, and tearing the sleeve of his jacket open with his teeth, he drew from the lining two letters, wrapped carefully in a piece of cloth. "Here," he said in a low voice, "is a man's life!"

Marie-Anne knew nothing of Chanlouineau's promises and hopes, and she was, moreover, so distressed by what the young farmer had previously said that at first she did not understand his meaning. All she could do was to repeat mechanically, "This is a man's life!"

"Hush, speak lower!" interrupted Chanlouineau. "Yes, one of these letters might, perhaps, save the life of a prisoner now under sentence of death."

"Unfortunate man! Why do you not make use of it and save yourself?"

The young farmer shook his head. "Would it ever be possible for you to love me? he said. "No, it wouldn't be possible; and so what wish can I have to live? At least I shall be able to forget everything when I am underground. Moreover, I have been justly condemned. I knew what I was doing when I left La Reche with my gun over my shoulder and my sword by my side; I have no right to complain. But these judges of ours have condemned an innocent man—"

"The Baron d'Escorval?"

"Yes—Maurice's father!" His voice changed as he pronounced the name of his envied rival—envied, no doubt, and yet to assure this rival's happiness and Marie-Anne's he would have given ten lives had they been his to give. "I wish to save the baron," he added, "and I can do so."

"Oh! if what you said were true? But you undoubtedly deceive yourself."

THE HONOR OF THE NAME

PART II

"I KNOW what I am saying," rejoined Chanlouineau; and still fearful lest some spy might be concealed outside, he now came close to Marie-Anne and in a low voice spoke rapidly as follows: "I never believed in the success of this conspiracy, and when I sought for a weapon of defense in case of failure, the Marquis de Sairmeuse furnished it. When it became necessary to send out a circular, warning our accomplices of the date decided upon for the rising, I persuaded M. Martial to write a model. He suspected nothing. I told him it was for a wedding, and he did what I asked. This letter, which is now in my possession, is the rough draft of the circular we sent; and it is in the Marquis de Sairmeuse's handwriting. It is impossible for him to deny it. There is an erasure in every line, and every one would look at the letter as the handiwork of a man seeking to convey his real meaning in ambiguous phrases."

With these words Chanlouineau opened the envelope and showed her the famous letter he had dictated, in which the space for the date of the insurrection was left blank. "My dear friend, we are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on, etc."

The light that had sparkled in Marie-Anne's eyes was suddenly bedimmed. "And you think that this letter can be of any use?" she inquired with evident discouragement.

"I don't *think* so!"

"But—"

With a gesture he interrupted her. "We must not lose time in discussion—listen to me. Of itself, this letter might be unimportant, but I have arranged matters in such a way that it will produce a powerful effect. I declared before the commission that the Marquis de Sairmeuse was one of the leaders of the movement. They laughed; and I read incredulity on all the judges' faces. But calumny is never without its effect.

When the Duc de Sairmeuse is about to receive a reward for his services, there will be enemies in plenty to remember and repeat my words. He knew this so well that he was greatly agitated, even while his colleagues sneered at my accusation."

"It's a great crime to charge a man falsely," murmured Marie-Anne with simple honesty.

"No doubt," rejoined Chanlouineau, "but I wish to save the baron, and I can not choose my means. As I knew that the marquis had been wounded, I declared that he was fighting against the troops by my side, and asked that he should be summoned before the tribunal; swearing that I had in my possession unquestionable proofs of his complicity."

"Did you say that the Marquis de Sairmeuse had been wounded?" inquired Marie-Anne.

Chanlouineau's face wore a look of intense astonishment. "What!" he exclaimed, "don't you know—?" Then after an instant's reflection: "Fool that I am!" he resumed. "After all, who could have told you what happened? However, you remember that while we were on our way to the Croix d'Arcy, after your father had rode on in advance, Maurice placed himself at the head of one division, and you walked beside him, while your brother Jean and myself stayed behind to urge the laggards forward. We were performing our duty conscientiously enough, when suddenly we heard the gallop of a horse behind us. 'We must know who is coming,' said Jean to me. So we paused. The horse soon reached us; we caught the bridle and held him. Can you guess who the rider was? Why, Martial de Sairmeuse. It would be impossible to describe your brother's fury when he recognized the marquis. 'At last I find you, you wretched noble!' he exclaimed, 'and now we will settle our account! After reducing my father, who had just given you a fortune, to despair and penury, you tried to degrade my sister. I will have my revenge! Down, we must fight!'"

Marie-Anne could scarcely tell whether she were awake or dreaming. "What, my brother challenged the marquis!" she murmured; "is it possible?"

"Brave as the marquis may be," pursued Chanlouineau, "he did not seem inclined to accept the invitation. He stammered out something like this: 'You are mad—you are jesting—haven't we always been friends? What does all this mean?' Jean ground his teeth in rage. 'This means that we have endured your insulting familiarity long enough,' he replied, 'and if you

don't dismount and fight me fairly, I will blow your brains out!' Your brother, as he spoke, manipulated his pistol in so threatening a manner that the marquis jumped off his horse and addressing me: 'You see, Chanlouineau,' he said, 'I must fight a duel or submit to murder. If Jean kills me there is no more to be said—but if I kill him, what is to be done?' I told him he would be free to go off unmolested on condition that he gave me his word not to proceed to Montaignac before two o'clock. 'Then I accept the challenge,' said he; 'give me a weapon. 'I gave him my sword, your brother drew his, and they took their places in the middle of the highway."

The young farmer paused to take breath, and then more slowly he resumed: "Marie-Anne, your father and I misjudged your brother. Poor Jean's appearance is terribly against him. His face indicates a treacherous, cowardly nature, his smile is cunning, and his eyes always shun yours. We distrusted him, but we should ask his forgiveness for having done so. A man who fights as I saw him fight deserves all our confidence. For this combat in the road, and in the darkness, was terrible. They attacked each other furiously, and at last Jean fell."

"Ah! my brother is dead!" exclaimed Marie-Anne.

"No," promptly replied Chanlouineau; "at least I have reason to hope not; and I know he has been well cared for. The duel had another witness, a man named Poignot, whom you must remember, as he was one of your father's tenants. He took Jean away with him, and promised me that he would conceal him and care for him. As for the marquis, he showed me that he was wounded as well, and then he remounted his horse, saying: 'What could I do? He would have it so.'"

Marie-Anne now understood everything. "Give me the letter," she said to Chanlouineau; "I will go to the duke. I will find some way of reaching him, and then God will guide me in the right course to pursue."

The noble-hearted young farmer calmly handed her the scrap of paper which might have been the means of his own salvation. "You must on no account allow the duke to suppose that you have the proof with which you threaten him about your person. He might be capable of any infamy under such circumstances. He will probably say at first that he can do nothing—that he sees no way to save the baron; but you must tell him that he must find a means if he does not wish this letter sent to Paris, to one of his enemies—"

He paused, for the bolt outside was being withdrawn. A moment later Corporal Bavois reappeared. "The half-hour expired ten minutes ago," said the old soldier sadly, "and I must obey my orders."

"Coming," replied Chanlouineau; "we have finished." And then handing Marie-Anne the second letter he had taken from his sleeve, "This is for you," he added. "You will read it when I am no more. Pray, pray, do not cry so! Be brave! You will soon be Maurice's wife. And when you are happy, think sometimes of the poor peasant who loved you so."

Marie-Anne could not utter a word, but she raised her face to his. "Ah! I dare not ask it!" he exclaimed. And for the first and only time in life he clasped her in his arms, and pressed his lips to her pallid cheek. "Now, good-by," he said once more. "Do not lose a moment. Good-by, forever!"

The prospect of capturing Lacheneur, the chief conspirator, had so excited the Marquis de Courtornieu that he had not been able to tear himself away from the citadel to go home to dinner. Stationed near the entrance of the dark corridor leading to Chanlouineau's cell, he watched Marie-Anne hasten away; but as he saw her go out into the twilight with a quick, alert step, he felt a sudden doubt concerning Chanlouineau's sincerity. "Can it be that this miserable peasant has deceived me?" thought he; and so strong was this new-born suspicion that he hastened after the young girl, determined to question her—to ascertain the truth—to arrest her even, if need be. But he no longer possessed the agility of youth, and when he reached the gateway the sentinel told him that Mademoiselle Lacheneur had already left the citadel. He rushed out after her, looked about on every side, but could see no trace of the nimble fugitive. Accordingly, he was constrained to return again, inwardly furious with himself for his own credulity. "Still, I can visit Chanlouineau," thought he, "and to-morrow will be time enough to summon this creature and question her."

"This creature" was, even then, hastening up the long, ill-paved street leading to the Hotel de France. Regardless of the inquisitive glances of the passers-by, she ran on, thinking only of shortening the terrible suspense which her friends at the hotel must be enduring. "All is not lost!" she exclaimed as she reentered the room where they were assembled.

"My God, Thou hast heard my prayers!" murmured the baroness. Then, suddenly seized by a horrible dread, she added:

"But do not try to deceive me. Are you not trying to comfort me with false hopes?"

"No! I am not deceiving you, madame. Chanlouineau has placed a weapon in my hands, which, I hope and believe, will place the Duc de Sairmeuse in our power. He only is omnipotent at Montaignac, and the only man who would oppose him, M. de Courtornieu, is his friend. I believe that M. d'Escorval can be saved."

"Speak!" cried Maurice; "what must we do?"

"Pray and wait, Maurice; I must act alone in this matter, but be assured that I will do everything that is humanly possible. It is my duty to do so, for am I not the cause of all your misfortune?"

Absorbed in the thought of the task before her, Marie-Anne had failed to remark a stranger who had arrived during her absence—an old white-haired peasant.

The abbe now drew her attention to him. "Here is a courageous friend," said he, "who ever since morning has been searching for you everywhere, in order to give you some news of your father."

Marie-Anne could scarcely falter her gratitude. "Oh, you need not thank me," said the old peasant. "I said to myself: 'The poor girl must be terribly anxious, and I ought to relieve her of her misery.' So I came to tell you that M. Lacheneur is safe and well, except for a wound in the leg, which causes him considerable suffering, but which will be healed in a few weeks. My son-in-law, who was hunting yesterday in the mountains, met him near the frontier in company of two of his friends. By this time he must be in Piedmont, beyond the reach of the gendarmes."

"Let us hope now," said the abbe, "that we shall soon hear what has become of Jean."

"I know already," replied Marie-Anne, "that my brother has been badly wounded, but some kind friends are caring for him."

Maurice, the abbe, and the retired officers now surrounded the brave young girl. They wished to know what she was about to attempt, and to dissuade her from incurring useless danger. But she refused to reply to their pressing questions; and when they suggested accompanying her, or, at least, following her at a distance, she declared that she must go alone. "However, I shall be here again in a couple of hours," she said, "and then

I shall be able to tell you if there is anything else to be done." With these words she hastened away.

To obtain an audience of the Duc de Sairmeuse was certainly a difficult matter, as Maurice and the abbe had ascertained on the previous day. Besieged by weeping and heart-broken families, his grace had shut himself up securely, fearing, perhaps, that he might be moved by their entreaties. Marie-Anne was aware of this, but she was not at all anxious, for by employing the same word that Chanlouineau had used—that same word "revelation"—she was certain to obtain a hearing. When she reached the Duc de Sairmeuse's mansion she found three or four lackeys talking in front of the principal entrance.

"I am the daughter of M. Lacheneur," said she, speaking to one of them. "I must see the duke at once, on matters connected with the revolt."

"The duke is absent."

"I come to make a revelation."

The servant's manner suddenly changed. "In that case follow me, mademoiselle," said he.

She did follow him up the stairs and through two or three rooms. At last he opened a door and bade her enter; but, to her surprise, it was not the Duc de Sairmeuse who was in the room, but his son, Martial, who, was stretched upon a sofa, reading a paper by the light of a large candelabra. On perceiving Marie-Anne he sprang up, pale and agitated. "You here!" he stammered; and then, swiftly mastering his emotion, he bethought himself of the possible motive of such a visit: "Lacheneur must have been arrested," he continued, "and wishing to save him from the military commission you have thought of me. Thank you for doing so, dear Marie-Anne, thank you for your confidence in me. I will not abuse it. Be reassured. We will save your father, I promise you—I swear it. We will find a means, for he must be saved. I will have it so!" As he spoke his voice betrayed the passionate joy that was surging in his heart.

"My father has not been arrested," said Marie-Anne, coldly.

"Then," said Martial, with some hesitation—"Then it is Jean who is a prisoner."

"My brother is in safety. If he survives his wounds he will evade all attempts at capture."

The pale face of the Marquis de Sairmeuse turned a deep crimson. Marie-Anne's manner showed him that she was ac-

quainted with the duel. It would have been useless to try and deny it; still he endeavored to excuse himself. "It was Jean who challenged me," he said; "I tried to avoid fighting, and I only defended my life in fair combat, and with equal weapons—"

Marie-Anne interrupted him. "I do not reproach you, Monsieur le Marquis," she said, quietly.

"Ah! Marie-Anne, I am more severe than you. Jean was right to challenge me. I deserved his anger. He knew my guilty thoughts, of which you were ignorant. Oh! Marie-Anne, if I wronged you in thought it was because I did not know you. Now I know that you, above all others, are pure and chaste—"

He tried to take her hands, but she instantly repulsed him, and broke into a fit of passionate sobbing. Of all the blows she had received this last was most terrible. What shame and humiliation! Now, indeed, her cup of sorrow was filled to overflowing. "Chaste and pure!" he had said. Oh, the bitter mockery of those words!

But Martial misunderstood the meaning of her grief. "Your indignation is just," he resumed, with growing eagerness. "But if I have injured you even in thought, I now offer you reparation. I have been a fool—a miserable fool—for I love you; I love, and can love you only. I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse. I am wealthy. I entreat you, I implore you to be my wife."

Marie-Anne listened in utter bewilderment. But an hour before Chanlouineau in his cell cried aloud that he died for love of her, and now it was Martial, who avowed his willingness to sacrifice his ambition and his future for her sake. And the poor peasant condemned to death, and the son of the all-powerful Duc de Sairmeuse, had confessed their passions in almost the same words.

Martial paused, awaiting some reply—a word, a gesture. None came; and then with increased vehemence, "You are silent," he cried. "Do you question my sincerity? No, it is impossible! Then why this silence? Do you fear my father's opposition? You need not. I know how to gain his consent. Besides, what does his approbation matter to us? Have we any need of him? Am I not my own master? Am I not rich—immensely rich? I should be a miserable fool, a coward, if I hesitated between his stupid prejudices and the happiness of my life." He was evidently weighing all the possible objections, in order to answer and overrule them beforehand. "Is

it on account of your family that you hesitate?" he continued. "Your father and brother are pursued, and France is closed against them. But we will leave France, and they shall come and live near you. Jean will no longer dislike me when you are my wife. We will all live in England or in Italy. Now I am grateful for the fortune that will enable me to make your life a continual enchantment. I love you—and in the happiness and tender love which shall be yours in the future, I will make you forget all the bitterness of the past!"

Marie-Anne knew the Marquis de Sairmeuse well enough to understand the intensity of the love revealed by these astounding proposals. And for that very reason she hesitated to tell him that he had triumphed over his pride in vain. She was anxiously wondering to what extremity his wounded vanity would carry him, and if a refusal might not transform him into a bitter foe.

"Why do you not answer?" asked Martial, with evident anxiety.

She felt that she must reply, that she must speak, say something; and yet it was with intense reluctance that she at last unclosed her lips. "I am only a poor girl, Monsieur le Marquis," she murmured. "If I accepted your offer, you would regret it for ever."

"Never!"

"But you are no longer free. You have already plighted your troth. Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu is your promised wife."

"Ah! say one word—only one—and this engagement which I detest shall be broken."

She was silent. It was evident that her mind was fully made up, and that she refused his offer.

"Do you hate me, then?" asked Martial, sadly.

If she had allowed herself to tell the whole truth, Marie-Anne would have answered "Yes"; for the Marquis de Sairmeuse did inspire her with almost insurmountable aversion. "I no more belong to myself than you belong to yourself," she faltered.

A gleam of hatred shone for a second in Martial's eyes. "Always Maurice!" said he.

"Always."

She expected an angry outburst, but he remained perfectly calm. "Then," said he, with a forced smile, "I must believe

this and other evidence. I must believe that you forced me to play a ridiculous part. Until now I doubted it."

Marie-Anne bowed her head, blushed with shame to the roots of her hair; still she made no attempt at denial. "I was not my own mistress," she stammered; "My father commanded and threatened, and I—I obeyed him."

"That matters little," he interrupted; "a pure minded young girl should not have acted so." This was the only reproach he allowed himself to utter, and he even regretted it, perhaps because he did not wish her to know how deeply he was wounded, perhaps because—as he afterward declared—he could not overcome his love for her. "Now," he resumed, "I understand your presence here. You come to ask mercy for M. d'Escorval."

"Not mercy, but justice. The baron is innocent."

Martial drew close to Marie-Anne, and lowering his voice: "If the father is innocent," he whispered, "then it is the son who is guilty."

She recoiled in terror. What! he knew the secret which the judges could not, or would not penetrate!

But seeing her anguish, he took pity on her. "Another reason," said he, "for attempting to save the baron! If his blood were shed upon the guillotine there would be an abyss between you and Maurice which neither of you could cross. So I will join my efforts to yours."

Blushing and embarrassed, Marie-Anne dared not thank him; for was she not about to requite his generosity by charging him with a complicity of which, as she well knew, he was innocent. Indeed, she would have by far preferred to find him angry and revengeful.

Just then a valet opened the door, and the Duc de Sairmeuse entered. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the threshold, "I must confess that Chupin is an admirable hunter. Thanks to him—" He paused abruptly: he had not perceived Marie-Anne until now. "What! Lacheneur's daughter!" said he, with an air of intense surprise. "What does she want here?"

The decisive moment had come—the baron's life depended upon Marie-Anne's courage and address. Impressed by this weighty responsibility, she at once recovered all her presence of mind. "I have a revelation to sell to you, sir," she said, with a resolute air.

The duke looked at her with mingled wonder and curiosity;

then, laughing heartily, he threw himself on to the sofa, exclaiming: "Sell it, my pretty one—sell it! I can't speak of that until I am alone with you."

At a sign from his father, Martial left the room. "Now tell me what it is," said the duke.

She did not lose a moment. "You must have read the circular convening the conspirators," she began.

"Certainly; I have a dozen copies of it in my pocket."

"Who do you suppose wrote it?"

"Why, the elder D'Escorval, or your father."

"You are mistaken, sir; that letter was prepared by the Marquis de Sairmeuse, your son."

The duke sprang to his feet, his face purple with anger. "Zounds! girl! I advise you to bridle your tongue!" cried he.

"There is proof of what I assert; and the lady who sends me here," interrupted Marie-Anne, quite unabashed, "has the original of this circular in safe keeping. It is in the handwriting of Monsieur le Marquis, and I am obliged to tell you—"

She did not have time to complete her sentence, for the duke sprang to the door, and, in a voice of thunder, called his son. As soon as Martial entered the room his grace turned to Marie-Anne: "Now, repeat," said he, "repeat before my son what you have just said to me."

Boldly, with head erect, and in a clear, firm voice, Marie-Anne repeated her charge. She expected an indignant denial, a stinging taunt, or, at least, an angry interruption from the marquis; but he listened with a nonchalant air, and she almost believed she could read in his eyes an encouragement to proceed, coupled with a promise of protection.

"Well, what do you say to that?" imperiously asked the duke, when Marie-Anne had finished.

"First of all," replied Martial, lightly, "I should like to see this famous circular."

The duke handed him a copy. "Here—read it," said he.

Martial glanced over the paper, laughed heartily, and exclaimed: "A clever trick."

"What do you say?"

"I say that this Chanlouineau is a sly rascal. Who the devil would have thought the fellow so cunning to see his honest face? Another lesson to teach one not to trust in appearances."

In all his life the Duc de Sairmeuse had never received so

severe a shock. "So Chanlouineau was not lying, then," he ejaculated, in a choked, unnatural voice, "you *were* one of the instigators of this rebellion?"

Martial's brow bent as, in a tone of marked disdain, he slowly replied: "This is the fourth time that you have addressed that question to me, and for the fourth time I answer: 'No.' That should suffice for you. If the fancy had seized me to take part in this movement, I should frankly confess it. What possible reason could I have for concealing anything from you?"

"The facts!" interrupted the duke, in a frenzy of passion; "the facts!"

"Very well," rejoined Martial, in his usual indifferent tone; "the fact is that the original of this circular does exist, that it was written in my best hand on a very large sheet of very poor paper. I recollect that in trying to find appropriate expressions I erased and re-wrote several words. Did I date this writing? I think I did, but I could not swear to it."

"How do you reconcile this with your denials?" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse.

"I can do this easily. Did I not tell you just now that Chanlouineau had made a tool of me?"

The duke no longer knew what to believe; but what exasperated him more than everything else was his son's imperturbable coolness. "You had much better confess that you were led into this by your mistress," he retorted, pointing at Marie-Anne.

"Mademoiselle Lacheneur is not my mistress," replied Martial, in an almost threatening tone. "Though it only rests with her to become the Marquise de Sairmeuse, if she chooses, to-morrow. But let us leave recriminations on one side, they can not further the progress of our business."

It was with difficulty that the duke checked another insulting rejoinder. However, he had not quite lost all reason. Trembling with suppressed rage, he walked round the room several times, and at last paused in front of Marie-Anne, who had remained standing in the same place, as motionless as a statute. "Come, my girl," said he, "give me the writing."

"It is not in my possession, sir."

"Where is it?"

"In the hands of a person who will only give it to you under certain conditions."

"Who is this person?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you."

There was both admiration and jealousy in the look that Martial fixed upon Marie-Anne. He was amazed by her coolness and presence of mind. Ah! indeed powerful must be the passion that imparted such a ringing clearness to her voice, such brilliancy to her eyes, and such precision to her words!

"And if I should not accept the—the conditions, what then?" asked M. de Sairmeuse.

"In that case the writing will be utilized."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that early to-morrow morning a trusty messenger will start for Paris, with the view of submitting this document to certain persons who are not exactly friends of yours. He will show it to M. Laine, for example—or to the Duc de Richelieu; and he will, of course, explain to them its significance and value. Will this writing prove the Marquis de Sairmeuse's complicity? Yes, or no? Have you, or have you not, dared to condemn to death the unfortunate men who were only your son's tools?"

"Ah, you little wretch, you hussy, you little viper!" interrupted the duke in a passionate rage. "You want to drive me mad! Yes, you know that I have enemies and rivals who would gladly give anything for this execrable letter. And if they obtain it they will demand an investigation, and then farewell to the rewards due to my services. It will be shouted from the housetops that Chanlouineau, in the presence of the tribunal, declared that you, marquis, were his leader and his accomplice. You will be obliged to submit to the scrutiny of physicians, who, finding a freshly-healed wound, will require you to state how and where you received it, and why you concealed it. And then, of course, I shall be accused! It will be said I expedited matters in order to silence the voices raised against my son. Perhaps my enemies will even say that I secretly favored the insurrection. I shall be vilified in the newspapers. And remember that it is you, you alone, marquis, who have ruined the fortunes of our house, our brilliant prospects, in this foolish fashion. You pretend to believe in nothing, to doubt everything—you are cold, skeptical, disdainful. But only let a pretty woman make her appearance on the scene, and you grow as wild as a schoolboy, and you are ready to commit any act of folly. It is you that I am speaking to, marquis. Don't you hear me? Speak! what have you to say?"

Martial had listened to this tirade with unconcealed scorn,

and without even attempting to interrupt it. But now he slowly replied: "I think, sir, that if Mademoiselle Lacheneur *had* any doubts of the value of the document she possesses, she certainly can have them no longer."

This answer fell upon the duke's wrath like a bucket of iced water. He instantly realized his folly; and frightened by his own words, stood literally stupefied with astonishment.

Without deigning to speak any further to his father, the marquis turned to Marie-Anne. "Will you be kind enough to explain what is required in exchange for this letter?" he said.

"The life and liberty of M. d'Escorval."

The duke started as if he had received an electric shock. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "I knew they would ask for something that is impossible!" He sank back into an armchair; and his despair now seemed as deep as his frenzy had been violent. He hid his face in his hands, evidently seeking for some expedient. "Why didn't you come to me before judgment was pronounced?" he murmured. "Then, I could have done anything—now, my hands are bound. The commission has spoken, and the sentence must be executed—" He rose, and added in the tone of a man who is utterly resigned: "Decidedly, I should risk more in attempting to save the baron"—in his anxiety he gave M. d'Escorval his title—"a thousand times more than I have to fear from my enemies. So, mademoiselle"—he no longer said, "my good girl"—"you can utilize your document."

Having spoken, he was about to leave the room, when Martial detained him. "Think again before you decide," said the marquis. "Our situation is not without a precedent. Don't you remember that a few months ago the Count de Lavalette was condemned to death? How the king wished to pardon him, but the ministers had contrary views. No doubt his majesty was the master; still what did he do? He affected to remain deaf to all the supplications made on the prisoner's behalf. The scaffold was even erected, and yet Lavalette was saved! And no one was compromised—yes, a jailer lost his position; but he is living on his pension now."

Marie-Anne caught eagerly at the idea which Martial had so cleverly presented. "Yes," she exclaimed, "the Count de Lavalette was favored by royal connivance, and succeeded in making his escape."

The simplicity of the expedient, and the authority of the example, seemed to make a vivid impression on the duke. He

remained silent for a moment, but Marie-Anne fancied she could detect an expression of relief steal over his face. "Such an attempt would be very hazardous," he murmured; "yet, with care, and if one were sure that it would remain a secret—"

"Oh! the secret will be religiously kept, sir," interrupted Marie-Anne.

With a glance Martial recommended her to remain silent, then turning to his father, he said: "We can always consider this expedient, and calculate the consequences—that won't bind us. When is this sentence to be carried into effect?"

"To-morrow," replied the duke. Terrible as this curt answer seemed, it did not alarm Marie-Anne. She had perceived by the duke's acute anxiety that she had good grounds for hope and she was now aware that Martial would favor her designs.

"We have, then, only the night before us," resumed the marquis. "Fortunately, it is only half-past seven, and until ten o'clock my father can visit the citadel without exciting suspicion." He paused and seemed embarrassed. The fact was, he had just realized the existence of a difficulty which might thwart all his plans. "Have we any intelligent men in the citadel?" he murmured. "A jailer or a soldier's assistance is indispensable." Turning to his father, he abruptly asked him: "Have you any man whom one can trust?"

"I have three or four spies—they can be bought—"

"No! the wretch who betrays his comrade for a few sous would betray you for a few louis. We must have an honest man who sympathizes with Baron d'Escorval's opinions—an old soldier who fought under Napoleon, if possible."

"I know the man you require!" exclaimed Marie-Anne with sudden inspiration, and noticing Martial's surprise. "Yes, a man at the citadel."

"Take care," observed the marquis. "Remember he will have a great deal to risk, for should this be discovered the accomplices must be sacrificed."

"The man I speak of is the one you need. I will be responsible for him. His name is Bavois, and he is a corporal in the first company of grenadiers."

"Bavois," repeated Martial, as if to fix the name in his memory; "Bavois. Very well, I will confer with him. My father will find some pretext for having him summoned here."

"It is easy to find a pretext," rejoined Marie-Anne. "He

was left on guard at Escorval after the searching party left the house."

"That's capital," said Martial, walking toward his father's chair. "I suppose," he continued, addressing the duke, "that the baron has been separated from the other prisoners."

"Yes, he is alone, in a large, comfortable room, on the second floor of the corner tower."

"The corner tower!" said Martial, "is that the very tall one, built on the edge of the cliff, where the rock rises almost perpendicularly?"

"Precisely," answered M. de Sairmeuse, whose promptness plainly implied that he was ready to risk a good deal to enable the prisoner to escape.

"What kind of a window is there in the baron's room?" inquired Martial.

"Oh, a tolerably large one, with a double row of iron bars, securely riveted into the stone walls. It overlooks the precipice."

"The deuce! The bars can easily be cut through, but that precipice is a serious difficulty, and yet, in one respect, it is an advantage, for no sentinels are stationed there, are they?"

"No, never. Between the walls and the citadel and the edge of the rock there is barely standing room. The soldiers don't venture there even in the day time."

"There is one more important question. What is the distance from M. d'Escorval's window to the ground?"

"I should say it is about forty feet from the base of the tower."

"Good! And from the base of the tower to the foot of the cliff—how far is that?"

"I really scarcely know. However, I should think fully sixty feet."

"Ah, that's terribly high; but fortunately the baron is still pretty vigorous."

The duke was growing impatient. "Now," said he to his son, "will you be so kind as to explain your plan?"

"My plan is simplicity itself," replied Martial. "Sixty and forty are one hundred; so it is necessary to procure a hundred feet of strong rope. It will make a very large bundle; but no matter. I will twist it round me, wrap myself up in a large cloak, and accompany you to the citadel. You will send for Corporal Bavois, leave me alone with him in a quiet place; and I will explain our wishes to him."

The Duc de Sairmeuse shrugged his shoulders. "And how will you procure a hundred feet of rope at this hour in Montaignac? Will you go about from shop to shop? You might as well trumpet your project all over France at once."

"I shall attempt nothing of the kind. What I can't do, the friends of the D'Escorval family will do." Then seeing that the duke was about to offer some fresh objections, Martial earnestly added: "Pray don't forget the danger that threatens us, nor the little time that is left us. I have made a blunder, let me repair it." And turning to Marie-Anne: "You may consider the baron saved," he pursued; "but it is necessary for me to confer with one of his friends. Return at once to the Hotel de France and tell the cure to meet me on the Place d'Armes, where I shall go at once and wait for him."

XX

DIRECTLY the Baron d'Escorval was arrested, although he was unarmed and although he had taken no part in the insurrection, he fully realized the fact that he was a lost man. He knew how hateful he was to the royalist party, and having made up his mind that he would have to die, he turned all his attention to the danger threatening his son. The unfortunate blunder he made in contradicting Chupin's evidence was due to his preoccupation, and he did not breathe freely until he saw Maurice led from the hall by the Abbe Midon and the friendly officers; for he feared that his son would be unable to restrain himself, that he would declare his guilt all to no purpose since the commission in its blind hate would never forgive the father, but rather satisfy its rancor by ordering the execution of the son as well. When Maurice was eventually got away, the baron became more composed, and with head erect, and steadfast eye, he listened to his sentence. In the confusion that ensued in removing the prisoners from the hall M. d'Escorval found himself beside Chanlouineau, who had begun his noisy lamentations. "Courage, my boy," he said indignantly at such apparent cowardice.

"Ah! it is easy to talk," whined the young farmer, who, seeing that he was momentarily unobserved, leaned toward the baron, and whispered: "It is for you that I am working. Save all your strength for to-night."

Chanlouineau's words and his burning glance surprised M. d'Escorval, but he attributed both to fear. When the guards took him back to his cell, he threw himself on to his pallet, and became absorbed in that vision of the last hour, which is at once the hope and despair of those who are about to die. He knew the terrible laws that govern a military commission. The next day—in a few hours—at dawn, perhaps, he would be taken from his cell, and placed in front of a squad of soldiers, an officer would lift his sword, and then all would be over. All over! ay, but what would become of his wife and son? His agony on thinking of those he loved was terrible. He was alone; he wept. But suddenly he started up, ashamed of his weakness. He must not allow these thoughts to unnerve him. Had he not already determined to meet death without flinching? Resolved to shake off this fit of melancholy, he walked round and round his cell, forcing his mind to occupy itself with material objects.

The room which had been allotted to him was very large. It had once communicated with an adjoining apartment, but the door had long since been walled up. The cement which held the stone together had crumbled away, leaving crevices through which one might look from one room into the other. M. d'Escorval mechanically applied his eye to one of these crevices. Perhaps he had a friend for a neighbor, some wretched man who was to share his fate. No. He could not see any one. He called, first in a whisper, and then louder; but no voice replied. "If I could only tear down this thin partition," he thought. He trembled, then shrugged his shoulders. And if he did, what then? He would only find himself in another apartment similar to his own, and communicating like his with a corridor full of guards, whose monotonous tramp he could plainly hear as they passed to and fro. What folly to think of escape! He knew that every possible precaution must have been taken to guard against it. Yes, he knew this, and yet he could not refrain from examining his window. Two rows of iron bars protected it. These were placed in such a way that it was impossible for him to protrude his head and see how far he was above the ground. The height, however, must be

considerable, judging from the extent of the view. The sun was setting; and through the violet haze the baron could discern an undulating line of hills, the culminating point of which must be the waste land of La Reche. The dark mass of foliage that he saw on the right was probably the forest of Sairmeuse. On the left, he divined rather than saw, nestling between the hills, the valley of the Oiselle and Escorval. Escorval, that lovely retreat where he had known such happiness, where he had hoped to die in peace. And remembering past times, and thinking of his vanished dreams, his eyes once more filled with tears. But he quickly dried them as he heard some one draw back the bolts securing the door of his room.

Two soldiers entered, one of whom carried a torch, while the other had with him one of those long baskets divided into compartments which are used in carrying meals to officers on guard. These men were evidently deeply moved, and yet, obeying a sentiment of instinctive delicacy, they affected a semblance of gaiety. "Here is your dinner, sir," said one soldier, "it ought to be good, since it comes from the commander's kitchen."

M. d'Escorval smiled sadly. Some attentions have a sinister significance coming from your jailer. Still, when he seated himself before the little table prepared for him, he found that he was really hungry. He ate with a relish, and was soon chatting quite cheerfully with the soldiers. "Always hope for the best, sir," said one of these worthy fellows. "Who knows? Stranger things have happened!"

When the baron had finished his meal, he asked for pen, ink, and paper, which were almost immediately brought to him. He found himself again alone; but his conversation with the soldiers had been of service, for his weakness had passed away, his self-possession had returned, and he could now reflect. He was surprised that he had heard nothing from his wife or son. Had they been refused admittance to the prison? No, that could not be; he could not imagine his judges sufficiently cruel to prevent him from pressing his wife and son to his heart, in a last embrace. Yet, how was it that neither the baroness nor Maurice had made an attempt to see him! Something must have prevented them from doing so. What could it be? He imagined the worst misfortunes. He saw his wife writhing in agony, perhaps dead. He pictured Maurice, wild with grief, on his knees at his mother's bedside. Still they might come yet,

for on consulting his watch, he found that it was only seven o'clock. But alas, he waited in vain. No one came. At last, he took up his pen, and was about to write, when he heard a bustle in the corridor outside. The clink of spurs resounded over the flagstones, and he heard the sharp clink of a musket as the sentinel presented arms. Trembling in spite of himself, the baron sprang up. "They have come at last!" he exclaimed.

But he was mistaken; the footsteps died away in the distance, and he reflected that this must have been some round of inspection. At the same moment, however, two objects, thrown through the little grated opening in the door of his cell, fell on to the floor in the middle of the room. M. d'Escorval caught them up. Somebody had thrown him two files. His first feeling was one of distrust. He knew that there were jailers who left no means untried to dishonor their prisoners before delivering them over to the executioner. Who had sent him these instruments of deliverance, a friend or an enemy? Chanlouineau's last words and the look that accompanied them recurred to his mind, perplexing him still more. He was standing with knitted brows, turning and returning the files in his hands, when he suddenly noticed on the floor a scrap of paper which at first had escaped his attention. He picked it up, unfolded it, and read: "Your friends are at work. Everything is prepared for your escape. Make haste and saw the bars of your window. Maurice and his mother embrace you. Hope, courage!"

Beneath these few lines was the letter M.

But the baron did not need this initial to feel assured, for he had at once recognized the Abbe Midon's handwriting. "Ah! he is a true friend," he murmured. "And this explains why neither my wife nor son come to visit me; and yet I doubted their energy—and was complaining of their neglect!" Intense joy filled his heart, he raised the letter that promised him life and liberty to his lips, and enthusiastically exclaimed: "To work! to work!"

He had chosen the finest of the two files, which were both well tempered, and was about to attack the bars, when he fancied he heard some one open the door of the next room. Some one had opened it, certainly, and had closed it again, but without locking it. The baron could hear this person moving cautiously about. What did it all mean? Were they incarcerating some fresh prisoner, or were they stationing a spy there?

Holding his breath and listening with the greatest attention, the baron now heard a singular sound, the cause of which it was quite impossible to explain. He stealthily advanced to the door that had been walled up, knelt down and peered through one of the crevices in the masonry. The sight that met his eyes amazed him. A man was standing in a corner of the room, and the baron could see the lower part of his body by the light of a large lantern which he had deposited on the floor at his feet. He was turning quickly round and round, thus unwinding a long rope which had been twined round his body as thread is wound about a bobbin. M. d'Escorval rubbed his eyes as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming. Evidently this rope was intended for him. It was to be attached to the broken bars. But how had this man succeeded in gaining admission to this room? Who could it be that enjoyed such liberty in the prison? He was not a soldier—or, at least, he did not wear a uniform. Unfortunately, the highest crevice was so situated that the baron could not see the upper part of the man's body; and despite all his efforts, he failed to distinguish the features of this friend—he judged him to be such—whose boldness verged on folly. Unable to resist his intense curiosity, M. d'Escorval was on the point of rapping against the wall to question him, when the door of the room where this man stood was impetuously thrown open. Another man entered, but his lineaments also were beyond the baron's range of vision. However, his voice could be heard quite plainly, and M. d'Escorval was seized with despair when this newcomer ejaculated in a tone of intense astonishment: "Good heavens! what are you about?"

"All is discovered!" thought the baron, growing sick at heart; while to his increased surprise the man he believed to be his friend calmly continued unwinding the rope, and quietly replied: "As you see, I am freeing myself from this burden, which I find extremely uncomfortable. There are at least sixty yards of it, I should think—and what a bundle it makes! I feared they would discover it under my cloak."

"And what are you going to do with all this rope?" inquired the newcomer.

"I am going to hand it to the Baron d'Escorval, to whom I have already given a file. He must make his escape tonight."

The scene was so improbable that the baron could not be-

lieve his own ears. "I can't be awake; I must be dreaming," he thought.

But the newcomer uttered a terrible oath, and, in an almost threatening tone, exclaimed: "We will see about that! If you have gone mad, thank God I still possess my reason! I will not permit—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the other, coldly, "you will permit it. This is merely the result of your own—credulity. The time to say, 'I won't permit it,' was when Chanlouineau asked you to allow him to receive a visit from Mademoiselle Lacheneur. Do you know what that cunning fellow wanted? Simply to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur a letter of mine, so compromising in its nature that if it ever reaches the hands of a certain person of my acquaintance, my father and I will be obliged to reside in London for the future. Then good-by to all our projects of an alliance between our two families!" The newcomer heaved a mighty sigh, followed by a half angry, half sorrowful exclamation; but the man with the rope, without giving him any opportunity to reply, resumed: "You yourself, marquis, would no doubt be compromised. Were you not a chamberlain during Bonaparte's reign? Ah, marquis! how could a man of your experience, so subtle, penetrating, and acute, allow himself to be duped by a low, ignorant peasant?"

Now M. d'Escorval understood everything. He was not dreaming; it was the Marquis de Courtornieu and Martial de Sairmeuse who were talking on the other side of the wall. The former had been so crushed by Martial's revelation that he made no effort to oppose him. "And this terrible letter?" he groaned.

"Marie-Anne Lacheneur gave it to the Abbe Midon, who came to me and said: 'Either the baron will escape, or this letter will be taken to the Duc de Richelieu.' I voted for the baron's escape, I assure you. The abbe procured all that was necessary; he met me at a rendezvous I appointed in a quiet place; he coiled all this rope round my body, and here I am."

"Then you think that if the baron escapes they will give you back your letter?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"You deluded man! Why, as soon as the baron is safe, they will demand the life of another prisoner, with the same threats."

"By no means."

"You will see."

"I shall see nothing of the kind, for a very simple reason. I have the letter now in my pocket. The abbe gave it to me in exchange for my word of honor."

M. de Courtornieu uttered an ejaculation which showed that he considered the abbe to be an egregious fool. "What!" he exclaimed. "You hold the proof, and— But this is madness! Burn this wretched letter in your lantern, and let the baron go where his slumbers will be undisturbed."

Martial's silence betrayed something like stupefaction. "Ah! so that's what you would do?" he asked at last.

"Certainly—and without the slightest hesitation."

"Ah, well! I can't say that I quite congratulate you."

The sneer was so apparent that M. de Courtornieu was sorely tempted to make an angry reply. But he was not a man to yield to his first impulse—this ex-imperial chamberlain, now a *grand prevot* under his Majesty King Louis XVIII. He reflected. Should he, on account of a sharp word, quarrel with Martial—with the only suitor who had ever pleased his daughter? A quarrel and he would be left without any prospect of a son-in-law! When would heaven send him such another? And how furious Blanche would be! He concluded to swallow the bitter pill; and it was in a tone of paternal indulgence that he remarked: "I see that you are very young, my dear Martial."

The baron was still kneeling beside the partition, holding his breath in an agony of suspense, and with his right ear against one of the crevices.

"You are only twenty, my dear Martial," pursued the Marquis de Courtornieu; "you are imbued with all the enthusiasm and generosity of youth. Complete your undertaking; I shall not oppose you; but remember that all may be discovered—and then—"

"Have no fear, sir, on that score," interrupted the young marquis; "I have taken every precaution. Did you see a single soldier in the corridor just now? No. That is because my father, at my request, has just assembled all the officers and guards together under pretext of ordering exceptional precautions. He is talking to them now. This gave me an opportunity to come here unobserved. No one will see me when I go out. Who, then, will dare suspect me of having any hand in the baron's escape?"

"If the baron escapes, justice will require to know who aided him."

Martial laughed. "If justice seeks to know, she will find a culprit of my providing. Go now; I have told you everything. I had but one person to fear—yourself. A trusty messenger requested you to join me here. You came; you know all, you have agreed to remain neutral. I am at ease, and the baron will be safe in Piedmont when the sun rises." He picked up his lantern, and added, gaily: "But let us go—my father can't harangue those soldiers forever."

"But you have not told me—" insisted M. de Courtornieu.

"I will tell you everything, but not here. Come, come!"

They went out, locking the door behind them; and then the baron rose from his knees. All sorts of contradictory ideas, doubts, and conjectures filled his mind. What could this letter have contained? Why had not Chanlouineau used it to procure his own salvation? Who would have believed that Martial would be so faithful to a promise wrested from him by threats? But this was a time for action, not for reflection. The bars were heavy, and there were two rows of them. M. d'Escorval set to work. He had supposed that the task would be difficult, but, as he almost immediately discovered, it proved a thousand times more arduous than he had expected. It was the first time that he had ever worked with a file, and he did not know how to use it. His progress was despairingly slow. Nor was that all. Though he worked as cautiously as possible, each movement of the instrument across the iron caused a harsh, grating sound which made him tremble. What if some one overheard this noise? And it seemed to him impossible for it to escape notice, since he could plainly distinguish the measured tread of the guards, who had resumed their watch in the corridor. So slight was the result of his labors that at the end of twenty minutes he experienced a feeling of profound discouragement. At this rate, it would be impossible for him to sever the first bar before daybreak. What, then, was the use of spending his time in fruitless labor? Why mar the dignity of death by the disgrace of an unsuccessful effort to escape?

He was hesitating when footsteps approached his cell. At once he left the window and seated himself at the table. Almost directly afterward the door opened and a soldier entered; an officer who did not cross the threshold, remarking at the

same moment: "You have your instructions, corporal, keep a close watch. If the prisoner needs anything, call."

M. d'Escorval's heart throbbed almost to bursting. What was coming now? Had M. de Courtornieu's advice carried the day, or had Martial sent some one to assist him? But the door was scarcely closed when the corporal whispered: "We must not be dawdling here."

M. d'Escorval sprang from his chair. This man was a friend. Here was help and life.

"I am Bavois," continued the corporal. "Some one said to me just now: 'One of the emperor's friends is in danger; are you willing to lend him a helping hand?' I replied: 'Present,' and here I am."

This certainly was a brave fellow. The baron held out his hand, and in a voice trembling with emotion: "Thanks," said he; "thanks. What, you don't even know me, and yet you expose yourself to the greatest danger for my sake."

Bavois shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "Positively my old hide is no more precious than yours. If we don't succeed they will chop off our heads with the same ax. But we *shall* succeed. Now, let's stop talking and proceed to business."

As he spoke he drew from under his long overcoat a strong iron crowbar and a small vial of brandy, both of which he laid upon the bed. He then took the candle and passed it five or six times before the window.

"What are you doing?" inquired the baron in suspense.

"I am signaling to your friends that everything is progressing favorably. They are down there waiting for us; and see, they are now answering." The baron looked, and three times they both perceived a little flash of flame, such as is produced by burning a pinch of gunpowder.

"Now," said the corporal, "we are all right. Let us see what progress you have made with the bars."

"I have scarcely begun," murmured M. d'Escorval.

The corporal inspected the work. "You may indeed say that you have made no progress," said he; "but never mind, I was 'prenticed to a locksmith once, and I know how to handle a file." Then drawing the cork from the vial of brandy, he fastened it to the end of one of the files, and swathed the handle of the tool with a piece of damp linen. "That's what they call putting a *stop* on the instrument," he remarked, by way of explanation. Immediately afterward he made an energetic attack

on the bars, and it was at once evident that he had by no means exaggerated either his knowledge of the task, or the efficacy of his precautions for deadening the sound. The harsh grating which had so alarmed the baron was no longer heard, and Bavois, finding he had nothing more to dread from the keenest ears, now made preparations to shelter himself from observation. Suspicion would be at once aroused if the gratings in the door were covered over, so the corporal hit upon another expedient. Moving the little table to another part of the room, he stood the candlestick on it in such a position that the window remained entirely in shadow. Then he ordered the baron to sit down, and handing him a paper, said: "Now read aloud, without pausing for a minute, until you see me stop work."

By this method they might reasonably hope to deceive the guards outside in the corridor; some of whom, indeed, did come to the door and look in; but after a brief glance they walked away, and remarked to their companions: "We have just taken a look at the prisoner. He is very pale, and his eyes are glistening feverishly. He is reading aloud to divert his mind. Corporal Bavois is looking out of the window. It must be dull music for him."

They little suspected why the baron's eyes glistened in this feverish fashion; and had no idea that if he read aloud it was with the view of overpowering any suspicious sound which might result from Corporal Bavois's labor. The time passed on, and while the latter worked M. d'Escorval continued reading. He had completed the perusal of the entire paper, and was about to begin it again, when the old soldier, leaving the window, motioned him to stop.

"Half the task is completed," he said in a whisper. "The lower bars are cut."

"Ah! how can I ever repay you for your devotion!" murmured the baron.

"Hush! not a word!" interrupted Bavois. "If I escape with you, I can never return here; and I shan't know where to go, for the regiment, you see, is my only family. Ah, well! if you give me a home with you I shall be very well content." Thereupon he swallowed some of the brandy, and set to work again with renewed ardor.

He had cut one of the bars of the second row, when he was interrupted by M. d'Escorval, who, without pausing in his re-

newed perusal, was pulling him by the coat tails to attract attention. The corporal turned round at once. "What's up?" said he.

"I heard a singular noise just now in the adjoining room where the ropes are."

Honest Bavois muttered a terrible oath. "Do they intend to betray us?" he asked. "I risked my life, and they promised me fair play." He placed his ear against a crevice in the partition, and listened for a long while. Nothing, not the slightest sound could be detected. "It must have been some rat that you heard," he said at last. "Go on with your reading." And he turned to his work again.

This was the only interruption, and a little before four o'clock everything was ready. The bars were cut, and the ropes, which had been drawn through an opening in the wall, were coiled under the window. The decisive moment had come. Bavois took the counterpane from the bed, fastened it over the opening in the door, and filled up the keyhole. "Now," said he, in the same measured tone he would have used in instructing a recruit, "attention! sir, and obey the word of command."

Then he calmly explained that the escape would consist of two distinct operations; first, one would have to gain the narrow platform at the base of the tower; next one must descend to the foot of the precipitous rock. The abbe, who understood this, had brought Martial two ropes; the one to be used in the descent of the precipice being considerably longer than the other. "I will fasten the shortest rope under your arms," said Bavois to the baron, "and I will let you down to the base of the tower. When you have reached it I will pass you the longer rope and the crowbar. Don't miss them. If we find ourselves without them on that narrow ledge of rock we shall either be compelled to deliver ourselves up, or throw ourselves down the precipice. I shan't be long in joining you. Are you ready?"

In reply M. d'Escorval lifted his arms, the rope was fastened securely about him, and he crawled through the window.

From above the height seemed immense. Below, on the barren fields surrounding the citadel, eight persons were waiting, silent, anxious, breathless with suspense. They were Madame d'Escorval and Maurice, Marie-Anne, the Abbe Midon, and four retired officers. There was no moon, but the night was

very clear, and they could see the tower plainly. Soon after four o'clock struck from the church steeples, they perceived a dark object glide slowly down the side of the tower—this was the baron. A short interval and then another form followed rapidly—this was Bavois. Half of the perilous journey was accomplished. The watchers below could see the two figures moving about on the narrow platform. The corporal and the baron were exerting all their strength to fix the crowbar securely in a crevice of the rock. Suddenly one of the figures stepped forward and glided gently down the side of the precipice. It could be none other than M. d'Escorval. Transported with happiness, his wife sprang forward with open arms to receive him. Alas! at that same moment a terrible cry rent the still night air.

M. d'Escorval was falling from a height of fifty feet; he was being hurled to the foot of the precipice. The rope had parted. Had it broken naturally? Maurice examined it; and then with a vow of vengeance exclaimed that they had been betrayed—that their enemy had arranged to deliver only a dead body into their hands—that the rope had been foully tampered with, intentionally cut with a knife beforehand!

XXI

FATHER CHUPIN, the false witness and the crafty spy, had refrained from sleeping and almost from drinking ever since that unfortunate morning when the Duc de Sairmeuse affixed to the walls of Montaignac the decree in which he promised twenty thousand francs to the person who delivered up Lacheneur, dead or alive. "Twenty thousand francs," muttered the old rascal gloomily; "twenty sacks with a hundred golden pistoles in each! Ah! if I could only discover this Lacheneur, even if he were dead and buried a hundred feet under ground, I should gain the reward."

He cared nothing for the shame which such a feat would entail. His sole thought was the reward—the blood-money. Unfortunately for his greed he had nothing whatever to guide

him in his researches; no clue, however vague. All that was known in Montaignac was that Lacheneur's horse had been killed at the Croix d'Arcy. But no one could say whether Lacheneur himself had been wounded, or whether he had escaped from the fray uninjured. Had he gained the frontier? Or had he found an asylum in some friend's house? Chupin was thus hungering for the price of blood, when, on the day of the baron's trial, as he was returning from the citadel, after giving his evidence, he chanced to enter a wine-shop. He was indulging in a strong potation when he suddenly heard a peasant near him mention Lacheneur's name in a low voice. This peasant was an old man, who sat at an adjoining table, emptying a bottle of wine in a friend's company, and he was telling the latter that he had come to Montaignac on purpose to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur some news of her father. He said that his son-in-law had met the chief conspirator in the mountains which separate the arrondissement of Montaignac from Savoy, and he even mentioned the exact place of meeting, which was near Saint Pavin-des-Grottes, a tiny village of only a few houses. Certainly the worthy fellow did not think he was committing a dangerous indiscretion, for in his opinion Lacheneur had already crossed the frontier, and put himself out of danger. But in this surmise he was grievously mistaken.

The frontier bordering on Savoy was guarded by soldiers, who had received orders to prevent any of the conspirators passing into Italian territory. And even if Piedmont was gained, it seemed likely that the Italian authorities would themselves arrest the fugitive rebels, and hand them over to their judges. Chupin was aware of all this, and resolved to act at once. He threw a coin on the counter, and without waiting for his change, rushed back to the citadel, and asked a sergeant at the gate for pen and paper. Writing was for him usually a most laborious task, but to-day it only took him a moment to pen these lines:

"I know Lacheneur's retreat, and beg monseigneur to order some mounted soldiers to accompany me, so that we may capture him. CHUPIN."

This letter was given to one of the guards, with a request to take it to the Duc de Sairmeuse, who was then presiding over the military commission. Five minutes later the soldier

returned with the same note, on the margin of which the duke had written an order, placing a lieutenant and eight men of the Montaignac chasseurs, who could be relied upon, at Chupin's disposal. The old spy also asked the loan of a horse for his own use, and this was granted him; and the party then started off at once in the direction of St. Pavin.

When, at the finish of the final stand made by the insurgents at the Croix d'Arcy, Lacheneur's horse received a bayonet wound in the chest, and reared and fell, burying its rider underneath, the latter lost consciousness, and it was not till some hours later that, restored by the fresh morning air, he regained his senses and was able to look about him. All he perceived was a couple of dead bodies lying some little distance off. It was a terrible moment, and in his soul he cursed the fate which had left him still alive. Had he been armed, he would no doubt have put an end to the mental tortures he was suffering by suicide—but then he had no weapon. So he must resign himself to life. Perhaps, too, the voice of honor whispered that it was cowardice to strive to escape responsibility by self-inflicted death. At last he endeavored to draw himself from under his horse, which proved no easy task, as his foot was still in the stirrup, and his limbs were so cramped that he could scarcely move them. Finally, however, he succeeded in freeing himself, and, on examination, discovered that he had only one wound, inflicted by a bayonet thrust, in the left leg. It caused him considerable pain, and he was trying to bandage it with his handkerchief when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He had no time for reflection; but at once darted into the forest that lies to the left of the Croix d'Arcy. The troops were returning to Montaignac after pursuing the rebels for more than three miles. There were some two hundred soldiers, who were bringing back a score of peasants as prisoners. Crouching behind an oak tree scarcely fifteen paces from the road, Lacheneur recognized several of the captives in the gray light of dawn. It was only by the merest chance that he escaped discovery; and he fully realized how difficult it would be for him to gain the frontier without falling into the hands of the many detachments of soldiery, who were doubtless scouring the country in every direction.

Still he did not despair. The mountains lay only two leagues away; and he firmly believed that he would be able to successfully elude his pursuers could he only gain the shelter of the

hills. He began his journey courageously, but soon he was obliged to admit that he had greatly overestimated his strength, which was well-nigh quite exhausted by the excessive labor and excitement of the past few days, coupled with the loss of blood occasioned by his wound. He tore up a stake in an adjacent vineyard, and using it as a staff, slowly dragged himself along, keeping in the shelter of the woods as much as possible, and creeping beside the hedges and in the ditches whenever he was obliged to cross an open space. Physical suffering and mental anguish were soon supplemented by the agony of hunger. He had eaten nothing for thirty hours, and felt terribly weak from lack of nourishment. Soon the craving for food became so intolerable that he was willing to brave anything to appease it. At last he perceived the thatched roofs of a little hamlet. He was going forward, decided to enter the first house and ask for food; the outskirts of the village were reached, and a cottage stood within a few yards, when suddenly he heard the rolling of a drum. Surmising that a party of troops was near at hand, he instinctively hid himself behind a wall. But the drum proved to be that of a public crier, summoning the village folk together; and soon he could hear a clear, penetrating voice reciting the following words: "This is to give notice that the authorities of Montaignac promise a reward of twenty thousand francs to whosoever delivers up the man known as Lacheneur, dead or alive. Dead or alive! Understand, that if he be dead, the compensation will be the same; twenty thousand francs! to be paid in gold. God save the king."

Then came another roll of the drum. But with a bound, Lacheneur had already risen; and though he had believed himself utterly exhausted, he now found superhuman strength to fly. A price had been set upon his head; and the circumstance awakened in his breast the frenzy that renders a hunted beast so dangerous. In all the villages around him he fancied he could hear the rolling of drums, and the voices of criers proclaiming him an outlaw. Go where he would now, he was a tempting bait offered to treason and cupidity. Whom could he dare confide in? Whom could he ask for shelter? And even if he were dead, he would still be worth a fortune. Though he might die from lack of nourishment and exhaustion under a bush by the wayside, yet his emaciated body would still be worth twenty thousand francs. And the man who found his corpse would not give it burial. He would place it on his cart

and convey it to Montaignac, present it to the authorities, and say: "Here is Lacheneur's body—give me the reward."

How long and by what paths he pursued his flight he could not tell. But several hours afterward, while he was wandering through the wooded hills of Charves, he espied two men, who sprang up and fled at his approach. In a terrible voice he called after them: "Eh! you fellows! do you each want to earn a thousand pistoles? I am Lacheneur."

They paused when they recognized him, and Lacheneur saw that they were two of his former followers, both of them well-to-do farmers, whom it had been difficult to induce to join in the revolt. They happened to have with them some bread and a little brandy, and they gave both to the famished man. They sat down beside him on the grass, and while he was eating they related their misfortunes. Their connection with the conspiracy had been discovered, and soldiers were hunting for them, but they hoped to reach Italy with the help of a guide who was waiting for them at an appointed place.

Lacheneur held out his hand. "Then I am saved," said he. "Weak and wounded as I am, I should have perished all alone."

But the two farmers did not take the hand he offered. "We ought to leave you," said the younger man gloomily, "for you are the cause of our misfortunes. You deceived us, Monsieur Lacheneur."

The leader of the revolt dared not protest; the reproach was so well deserved. However, the other farmer gave his companion a peculiar glance and suggested that they might let Lacheneur accompany them all the same. So they walked on all three together, and that same evening, after nine hours' journey through the mountains, they crossed the frontier. But, in the mean while, many and bitter had been the reproaches they had exchanged. On being closely questioned by his companions, Lacheneur, exhausted both in mind and body, finally admitted the insincerity of his promises, by means of which he had inflamed his followers' zeal. He acknowledged that he had spread the report that Marie-Louise and the young king of Rome were concealed in Montaignac, and that it was a gross falsehood. He confessed that he had given the signal for the revolt without any chance of success, and without any precise means of action, leaving everything to chance. In short, he confessed that nothing was real except the hatred, the bitter hatred he felt against the Sairmeuse family. A dozen times

at least during this terrible confession the peasants who accompanied him were on the point of hurling him over the precipice by the banks of which they walked. "So it was to gratify his own spite," they thought, quivering with rage, "that he set every one fighting and killing each other—that he has ruined us and driven us into exile. We'll see if he is to escape unpunished."

After crossing the frontier the fugitives repaired to the first hostelry they could find, a lonely inn, a league or so from the little village of Saint-Jean-de-Coche, and kept by a man named Balstain. It was past midnight when they rapped, but, despite the lateness of the hour, they were admitted, and ordered supper. Lacheneur, weak from loss of blood, and exhausted by his long tramp, went off to bed, however, without eating. He threw himself on to a pallet in an adjoining room and soon fell asleep. For the first time since meeting him, the two farmers now found an opportunity to talk in private. The same idea had occurred to both of them. They believed that by delivering Lacheneur up to the authorities, they might secure pardon for themselves. Neither of them would have consented to receive a single sou of the blood-money, but they did not consider there would be any disgrace in exchanging their own lives and liberty for Lacheneur's, especially as he had so deceived them. Eventually they decided to go to Saint-Jean-de-Coche directly supper was over and inform the Piedmontese guards.

But they reckoned without their host. They had spoken loud enough to be overheard by Balstain, the innkeeper, who during the day had been told of the magnificent reward promised for Lacheneur's capture. On learning that the exhausted man, now quietly sleeping under his roof, was the famous conspirator, he was seized with a sudden thirst for gold, and whispering a word to his wife he darted through the window of a back room to run and fetch the carabineers, as the Italian gendarmes are termed. He had been gone half an hour or so when the two peasants left the house, for they had drunk heavily with the view of mustering sufficient courage to carry their purpose into effect. They closed the door so violently on going out that Lacheneur woke up. He rose from his bed and came into the front room, where he found the innkeeper's wife alone. "Where are my friends?" he asked anxiously. "And where is your husband?"

Moved by sympathy, the woman tried to falter some excuse,

but finding none, she threw herself at his feet, exclaiming: "Fly, save yourself—you are betrayed!"

Lacheneur rushed back into his bedroom, trying to find a weapon with which to defend himself, or a mode of egress by which he could escape unperceived. He had thought they might abandon him, but betray him—no, never! "Who has sold me?" he asked in an agitated voice.

"Your friends—the two men who supped at that table."

"That's impossible!" he retorted: for he ignored his comrades' designs and hopes; and could not, would not, believe them capable of betraying him for lucre.

"But," pleaded the innkeeper's wife, still on her knees before him, "they have just started for Saint-Jean-de-Coche, where they mean to denounce you. I heard them say that your life would purchase theirs. They certainly mean to fetch the carabineers; and, alas, must I also say that my own husband has gone to betray you."

Lacheneur understood everything now! And this supreme misfortune, after all the misery he had endured, quite prostrated him. Tears gushed from his eyes, and, sinking on to a chair, he murmured: "Let them come; I am ready for them. No, I will not stir from here! My miserable life is not worth such a struggle."

But the landlady rose, and grasping at his clothing, shook and dragged him to the door—she would have carried him had she possessed sufficient strength. "You shall not be taken here; it will bring misfortune on our house!"

Bewildered by this violent appeal, and urged on by the instinct of self-preservation, so powerful in every human heart, Lacheneur advanced to the threshold. The night was very dark, and a chilly fog intensified the gloom.

"See, madame," said he in a gentle voice, "how can I find my way through these mountains, which I do not know, where there are no roads—where the footpaths are scarcely traced?"

But Balstain's wife would not argue; pushing him forward and turning him as one does a blind man to set him on the right track. "Walk straight before you," said she, "always against the wind. God will protect you. Farewell!"

He turned to ask further directions, but she had reentered the house and closed the door. Upheld by a feverish excitement, he walked on during long hours. Soon he lost his way, and wandered among the mountains, benumbed with cold, stum-

bling over the rocks, at times falling to the ground. It was a wonder that he was not precipitated over the brink of some precipice. He had lost all idea of his whereabouts, and the sun was already high in the heavens when at last he met some one of whom he could ask his way. This was a little shepherd boy, who was looking for some stray goats, but the lad, frightened by the stranger's wild and haggard aspect, at first refused to approach. At last the offer of a piece of money induced him to come a little nearer. "You are just on the frontier line," said he. "Here is France, and there is Savoy."

"And which is the nearest village?"

"On the Savoy side, Saint-Jean-de-Coche; on the French side, Saint-Pavin."

So after all his terrible exertions, Lacheneur was not a league from the inn. Appalled by this discovery, he remained for a moment undecided which course to pursue. Still, after all what did it matter? Was he not doomed, and would not every road lead him to death? However, at last he remembered the carabineers the innkeeper's wife had warned him against, and slowly crawled down the steep mountainside leading back into France. He was near Saint-Pavin, when he espied a cottage standing alone, and in front of it a young peasant woman spinning in the sunshine. He dragged himself toward her, and in a weak voice begged her hospitality.

The woman rose, surprised and somewhat alarmed by the aspect of this stranger, whose face was ghastly pale, and whose clothes were torn and soiled with dust and blood. She looked at him more closely, and then perceived that his age, stature, and features corresponded with the descriptions of Lacheneur, which had been distributed round about the frontier. "Why, you are the conspirator they are hunting for, and for whom they promise a reward of twenty thousand francs," she said.

Lacheneur trembled. "Yes," he replied after a moment's hesitation, "I am Lacheneur. Betray me if you will, but in charity's name give me a morsel of bread and allow me to rest a little."

"We betray you, sir!" said she. "Ah! you don't know the Antoines! Come into our house, and lie down on the bed while I prepare some refreshment for you. When my husband comes home, we will see what can be done."

It was nearly sunset when the master of the house, a sturdy mountaineer, with a frank face, entered the cottage. On per-

ceiving the stranger seated at his fireside he turned frightfully pale. "Unfortunate woman!" he murmured to his wife, "don't you know that any one who shelters this fugitive will be shot, and his house leveled to the ground?"

Lacheneur overheard these words; he rose with a shudder. He knew that a price had been set upon his head, but until now he had not realized the danger to which his presence exposed these worthy people. "I will go at once," said he, gently.

But the peasant laid his broad hand kindly on the outlaw's shoulder and forced him to resume his seat. "It was not to drive you away that I said that," he remarked. "You are at home, and you shall remain here until I can find some means of insuring your safety."

The woman flung her arms round her husband's neck, and, in a loving voice, exclaimed: "Ah! you are a noble man, Antoine."

He smiled, tenderly kissed her, then, pointing to the open door: "Watch!" said he, and turning to Lacheneur: "It won't be easy to save you, for the promise of that big reward has set a number of evil-minded people on the alert. They know that you are in the neighborhood, and a rascally innkeeper has crossed the frontier for the express purpose of betraying your whereabouts to the French gendarmes."

"Balstain?"

"Yes, Balstain; and he is hunting for you now. But that's not everything; as I passed through Saint-Pavin, coming back a little while ago, I saw eight mounted soldiers, with a peasant guide, who was also on horseback. They declared that they knew you were concealed in the village, and were going to search each house in turn."

These soldiers were the Montaignac chasseurs, placed at Chupin's disposal by the Duc de Sairmeuse. The task was certainly not at all to their taste, but they were closely watched by the lieutenant in command, who hoped to receive some substantial reward if the expedition was crowned with success.

But to return to Lacheneur. "Wounded and exhausted as you are," continued Antoine, "you can't possibly make a long march for a fortnight hence, and till then you must conceal yourself. Fortunately, I know a safe retreat in the mountain, not far from here. I will take you there to-night, with provisions enough to last you for a week."

Just then he was interrupted by a stifled cry from his wife. He turned, and saw her fall almost fainting against the door, her face white as her linen cap, her finger pointing to the path that led from Saint-Pavin to the cottage. "The soldiers—they are coming!" she gasped.

Quicker than thought, Lacheneur and the peasant sprang to the door to see for themselves. The young woman had spoken the truth; for here came the Montaignac chasseurs, slowly climbing the steep footpath. Chupin walked in advance, urging them on with voice, gesture, and example. An imprudent word from the little shepherd boy had decided the fugitive's fate; for on returning to Saint-Pavin, and hearing that the soldiers were searching for the chief conspirator, the lad had chanced to say: "I met a man just now on the mountain who asked me where he was; and I saw him go down the footpath leading to Antoine's cottage." And in proof of his words, he proudly displayed the piece of silver which Lacheneur had given him.

"One more bold stroke and we have our man!" exclaimed Chupin. "Come, comrades!" And now the party were not more than two hundred feet from the house in which the outlaw had found an asylum.

Antoine and his wife looked at each other with anguish in their eyes. They saw that their visitor was lost.

"We must save him! we must save him!" cried the woman.

"Yes, we must save him!" repeated the husband gloomily. "They shall kill me before I betray a man in my own house."

"If he could hide in the stable behind the bundles of straw—"

"Oh, they would find him! These soldiers are worse than tigers, and the wretch who leads them on must have a bloodhound's scent." He turned quickly to Lacheneur. "Come, sir," said he, "let us leap from the back window and fly to the mountains. They will see us, but no matter! These horsemen are always clumsy runners. If you can't run, I'll carry you. They will probably fire at us, but miss their aim."

"And your wife?" asked Lacheneur.

The honest mountaineer shuddered; still he simply said: "She will join us."

Lacheneur grasped his protector's hand. "Ah! you are a noble people," he exclaimed, "and God will reward you for your kindness to a poor fugitive. But you have done too much already. I should be the basest of men if I exposed you to

useless danger. I can bear this life no longer; I have no wish to escape." Then drawing the sobbing woman to him and kissing her on the forehead, "I have a daughter, young and beautiful like yourself," he added. "Poor Marie-Anne! And I pitilessly sacrificed her to my hatred! I must not complain; come what may, I have deserved my fate."

The sound of the approaching footsteps became more and more distinct. Lacheneur straightened himself up, and seemed to be gathering all his energy for the decisive moment. "Remain inside," he said imperiously, to Antoine and his wife. "I am going out; they must not arrest me in your house." And as he spoke, he crossed the threshold with a firm tread. The soldiers were but a few paces off. "Halt!" he exclaimed, in a loud, ringing voice. "Are you not seeking for Lacheneur? I am he! I surrender myself."

His manner was so dignified, his tone so impressive, that the soldiers involuntarily paused. This man before them was doomed; they knew the fate awaiting him, and seemed as awed as if they had been in the presence of death itself. One there was among the searching party whom Lacheneur's ringing words had literally terrified, and this was Chupin. Remorse filled his cowardly heart, and pale and trembling, he sought to hide himself behind the soldiers.

But Lacheneur walked straight toward him. "So it is you who have sold my life, Chupin?" he said scornfully. "You have not forgotten, I perceive, how often my daughter filled your empty larder—so now you take your revenge."

The old scoundrel seemed crushed by these words. Now that he had done this foul deed, he knew what betrayal really was. "So be it," resumed Lacheneur. "You will receive the price of my blood; but it will not bring you good fortune—traitor!"

Chupin, however, indignant with his own weakness, was already making a vigorous effort to recover a semblance of self-composure. "You have conspired against the king," he stammered. "I only did my duty in denouncing you." And turning to the soldiers, he added: "As for you, comrades, you may be sure the Duc de Sairmeuse will remember your services."

Lacheneur's hands were bound, and the party was about to descend the slope, when a man, roughly clad, bareheaded, covered with perspiration, and panting for breath, suddenly made his appearance. The twilight was falling, but Lacheneur recognized Balstain. "Ah! you have him!" exclaimed the inn-

keeper, pointing to the prisoner, as soon as he was within speaking distance. "The reward belongs to me—I denounced him first on the other side of the frontier, as the carabineers at Saint-Jean-de-Coche will testify. He would have been captured last night in my house if he hadn't managed to run away in my absence. I've been following the bandit for sixteen hours." He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, being full of fear lest he might lose his reward, and only reap disgrace and obloquy in recompense for his treason.

"If you have any right to the money, you must prove it before the proper authorities," said the officer in command.

"If I have any right!" interrupted Balstain; "who contests my right, then?" He looked threateningly around him, and casting his eyes on Chupin, "Is it you?" he asked. "Do you dare to assert that you discovered the brigand?"

"Yes, it was I who discovered his hiding-place."

"You lie, you impostor!" vociferated the innkeeper; "you lie!" The soldiers did not budge. This scene repaid them for the disgust they had experienced during the afternoon. "But," continued Balstain, "what else could one expect from such a knave as Chupin? Every one knows that he's been obliged to fly from France over and over again on account of his crimes. Where did you take refuge when you crossed the frontier, Chupin? In my house, in Balstain's inn. You were fed and protected there. How many times haven't I saved you from the gendarmes and the galleys? More times than I can count. And to reward me you steal my property; you steal this man who was mine—"

"The fellow's insane!" ejeculated the terrified Chupin, "he's mad!"

"At least you will be reasonable," exclaimed the innkeeper, suddenly changing his tactics. "Let's see, Chupin, what you'll do for an old friend? Divide, won't you? No, you say no? How much will you give me, comrade? A third? Is that too much? A quarter, then—"

Chupin felt that the soldiers were enjoying his humiliation. They were indeed, sneering at him, and only an instant before they had, with instinctive loathing, avoided coming in contact with him. The old knave's blood was boiling, and pushing Balstain aside, he cried to the chasseurs: "Come—are we going to spend the night here?"

On hearing these words, Balstain's eyes sparkled with re-

vengeful fury, and suddenly drawing his knife from his pocket and making the sign of the cross in the air: "Saint-Jean-de-Coche," he exclaimed, in a ringing voice, "and you, Holy Virgin, hear my vow. May my soul burn in hell if I ever use a knife at meals until I have plunged the one I now hold into the heart of the scoundrel who has defrauded me!" With these words he hurried away into the woods, and the soldiers took up their line of march.

But Chupin was no longer the same. His impudence had left him and he walked along with hanging head, his mind full of sinister presentiments. He felt sure that such an oath as Balstain's, and uttered by such a man, was equivalent to a death warrant, or at least to a speedy prospect of assassination. The thought tormented him so much indeed, that he would not allow the detachment to spend the night at Saint-Pavin, as had been agreed upon. He was impatient to leave the neighborhood. So after supper he procured a cart; the prisoner was placed in it, securely bound, and the party started for Montaignac. The great bell was tolling two in the morning when Lacheneur was conducted into the citadel; and at that very moment M. d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois were making their final preparations for escape.

XXII

ON being left alone in his cell after Marie-Anne's departure, Chanlouineau gave himself up to despair. He loved Marie-Anne most passionately, and the idea that he would never see her again on earth proved heart-rending. Some little comfort he certainly derived from the thought that he had done his duty, that he had sacrificed his own life to secure her happiness, but then this result had only been obtained by simulating the most abject cowardice, which must disgrace him forever in the eyes of his fellow prisoners, and the guards. Had he not offered to sell Lacheneur's life for his own, moreover? True it was but a ruse, and yet those who knew nothing of his secret would always brand him as a traitor and a coward. To a man

of his true, valiant heart such a prospect was particularly distressing, and he was still brooding over the idea when the Marquis de Courtornieu entered his cell to ascertain the result of Marie-Anne's visit. "Well, my good fellow—" began the old nobleman, in his most condescending manner; but Chanlouineau did not allow him time to finish. "Leave," he cried, in a fit of rage. "Leave or—"

Without waiting to hear the end of the sentence the marquis made his escape, greatly surprised and not a little dismayed by this sudden change in the prisoner's manner. "What a dangerous, bloodthirsty rascal!" he remarked to the guard. "It would, perhaps, be advisable to put him into a strait-jacket!"

But there was no necessity for that; for scarcely had the marquis left, than the young farmer threw himself on to his pallet, oppressed with feverish anxiety. Would Marie-Anne know how to make the best use of the weapon he had placed in her hands? He hoped so, for she would have the Abbe Midon's assistance, and besides he considered that the possession of this letter would frighten the Marquis de Sairmeuse into any concessions. In this last surmise Chanlouineau was entirely mistaken. The fear which Martial seemingly evinced during the interview with Marie-Anne and his father was all affected. He pretended to be alarmed, in order to frighten the duke, for he really wished to assist the girl he so passionately loved, and besides the idea of saving an enemy's life, of wresting him from the executioner on the very steps of the scaffold, was very pleasing to his mind which at times took a decidedly chivalrous turn. Poor Chanlouineau, however, was ignorant of all this, and consequently his anxiety was perfectly natural. Throughout the afternoon he remained in anxious suspense, and when the night fell, stationed himself at the window of his cell gazing on to the plain below, and trusting that if the baron succeeded in escaping, some sign would warn him of the fact. Marie-Anne had visited him, she knew the cell he occupied and surely she would find some means of letting him know that his sacrifice had not been in vain. Shortly after two o'clock in the morning he was alarmed by a great bustle in the corridor outside. Doors were thrown open, and then slammed to; there was a loud rattle of keys; guards hurried to and fro, calling each other; the passage was lighted up, and then as Chanlouineau peered through the grating in the door of his cell he suddenly perceived Lacheneur as pale as a

ghost walk by conducted by some soldiers. The young farmer almost doubted his eyesight; for he really believed his former leader had escaped. Another hour, and another hour passed by and yet did he prolong his anxious vigil. Not a sound, save the tramp of the guards in the corridor, and the faint echo of some distant challenge as sentinels were relieved outside. At last, however, there abruptly came a despairing cry. What was it? He listened; but it was not repeated. After all, the occurrence was not so surprising. There were twenty men in that citadel under sentence of death, and the agony of that, their last night, might well call forth a lamentation. At length the gray light of dawn stole through the window bars, the sun rose rapidly and Chanlouineau, hopeful for some sign, till then murmured in despair, that the letter must have been useless. Poor generous peasant! His heart would have leaped with joy if as he spoke those words he could only have cast a glance on the courtyard of the citadel.

An hour after the *reveille* had sounded, two countrywomen, carrying butter and eggs to market, presented themselves at the fortress gate, and declared that while passing through the fields below the cliff on which the citadel was built, they had perceived a rope dangling from the side of the rock. A rope! Then one of the condemned prisoners must have escaped. The guards hastened from cell to cell and soon discovered that the Baron d'Escorval's room was empty. And not merely had the baron fled, but he had taken with him the man who had been left to guard him—Corporal Bavois, of the grenadiers. Every one's amazement was intense, but their fright was still greater. There was not a single officer who did not tremble on thinking of his responsibility; not one who did not see his hopes of advancement forever blighted. What should be said to the formidable Duc de Sairmeuse and to the Marquis de Courtornieu, who in spite of his calm polished manners, was almost as much to be feared? It was necessary to warn them, however, and so a sergeant was despatched with the news. Soon they made their appearance, accompanied by Martial; and to look at all three it would have been said that they were boiling over with anger and indignation. The Duc de Sairmeuse's rage was especially conspicuous. He swore at everybody, accused everybody, and threatened everybody. He began by consigning all the keepers and guards to prison, and even talked of demanding the dismissal of all the officers.

"As for that miserable Bavois," he exclaimed—"as for that cowardly deserter, he shall be shot as soon as we capture him, and we will capture him, you may depend upon it!"

The officials had hoped to appease the duke's wrath a little by informing him of Lacheneur's arrest; but he knew of this already, for Chupin had ventured to wake him up in the middle of the night to tell him the great news. The baron's escape afforded his grace an opportunity to exalt Chupin's merits. "The man who discovered Lacheneur will know how to find this traitor D'Escorval," he remarked.

As for M. de Courtornieu, he took what he called "measures for restoring this great culprit to the hands of justice." That is to say, he despatched couriers in every direction, with orders to make close inquiries throughout the neighborhood. His commands were brief, but to the point; they were to watch the frontier, to submit all travelers to a rigorous examination, to search the houses and sow the description of D'Escorval's appearance broadcast through the land. But first of all he issued instructions for the arrest of the Abbe Midon and Maurice d'Escorval.

Among the officers present there was an old lieutenant, who had felt deeply wounded by some of the imputations which the Duc de Sairmeuse had cast right and left in his affected wrath. This lieutenant heard the Marquis de Courtornieu give his orders, and then stepped forward with a gloomy air, remarking that these measures were doubtless all very well, but at the same time it was urgent that an investigation should take place at once, so as to learn for certain how the baron had escaped and who were his accomplices if he had any. At the mention of this word "investigation," both the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu shuddered. They could not ignore the fact that their reputations were at stake, and that the merest trifle might disclose the truth. A neglected precaution, any insignificant detail, an imprudent word or gesture might ruin their ambitious hopes forever. They trembled to think that this officer might be a man of unusual shrewdness, who had suspected their complicity, and was impatient to verify his presumptions. In point of fact, they were unnecessarily alarmed, for the old lieutenant had not the slightest suspicion of the truth. He had spoken on the impulse of the moment, merely to give vent to his displeasure. He was not even keen enough to remark a rapid glance which

the duke and the marquis exchanged. Martial noticed this look, however, and with studied politeness, remarked: "Yes, we must institute an investigation; that suggestion is as shrewd as it is opportune."

The old lieutenant turned away with a muttered oath. "That coxcomb is poking fun at me," he thought; "and he and his father and that prig the marquis deserve a box on the ears."

In reality, however, Martial was not poking fun at him. Bold as was his remark it was made advisedly. To silence all future suspicions it was absolutely necessary that an investigation should take place immediately. But then it would, by reason of their position and functions, naturally devolve on the duke and the marquis, who would know just how much to conceal, and how much to disclose. They began their task immediately, with a haste which could not fail to dispel all doubts, if indeed any existed in the minds of their subordinates.

Martial thought he knew the details of the escape as well as the fugitives themselves, for even if they had been the actors, he was at any rate the author of the drama played that night. However, he was soon obliged to admit that he was mistaken in his opinion; for the investigation revealed several incomprehensible particulars. It had been determined beforehand that the baron and the corporal would have to make two successive descents. Hence the necessity of having two ropes. These ropes had been provided, and the prisoners must have used them. And yet only one rope could be found—the one which the peasant woman had perceived hanging from the rocky platform at the base of the citadel where it was made fast to an iron crowbar. From the window of the cell, to the platform, there was no rope, however. "This is most extraordinary!" murmured Martial, thoughtfully.

"Very strange!" approved M. de Courtornieu.

"How the devil could they have reached the base of the tower?"

"That is what I can't understand."

But Martial soon found other causes for surprise. On examining the rope that remained—the one which had been used in making the descent of the cliff—he discovered that it was not of a single piece. Two pieces had been knotted together. The longest piece had evidently been too short How did this happen? Could the duke have made a mistake in the height of the cliff? or had the abbe measured the rope incorrectly?

But Martial had also measured it with his eye, while it was wound round him, and it had then seemed to him that the rope was much longer, fully a third longer, than it now appeared.

"There must have been some accident," he remarked to his father and the marquis; "what I can't say."

"Well, what does it matter?" replied M. de Courtornieu, "you have the compromising letter, haven't you?"

But Martial's mind was one of these that never rest until they have solved the problem before them. Accordingly, he insisted on going to inspect the rocks at the foot of the precipice. Here they discovered several stains, formed of coagulated blood. "One of the fugitives must have fallen," said Martial, quickly, "and been dangerously wounded!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the Duc de Sairmeuse, "if it is the Baron d'Escorval who has broken his neck, I shall be delighted!"

Martial turned crimson, and looked searchingly at his father. "I suppose, sir, that you do not mean one word of what you are saying," he observed, coldly. "We pledged ourselves upon the honor of our name to save the baron. If he has been killed it will be a great misfortune for us, a very great misfortune."

When his son addressed him in this haughty, freezing tone of his, the duke never knew how to reply. He was indignant, but his son's was the stronger nature.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed M. de Courtornieu; "if the rascal had merely been wounded we should have known it."

Such also was Chupin's opinion. He had been sent for by the duke, and had just made his appearance. But the old scoundrel, usually so loquacious and officious, now replied in the briefest fashion; and, strange to say, he did not offer his services. His habitual assurance and impudence, and his customary cunning smile, had quite forsaken him; and in lieu thereof his brow was overcast, and his manners strangely perturbed. So marked was the change that even the Duc de Sairmeuse observed it. "What misfortune have you had, Master Chupin?" he asked.

"Why, while I was coming here," replied the old knave in a sullen tone, "a band of ragamuffins pelted me with mud and stones, and ran after me, shouting: 'Traitor! traitor!' as loud as they could." He clenched his fists as he spoke, as if he were

meditating vengeance; then suddenly he added: "The people of Montaignac are quite pleased this morning. They know that the baron has escaped, and they are rejoicing."

Alas! the joy which Chupin spoke of was destined to be of short duration, for the execution of the conspirators sentenced on the preceding afternoon was to take place that very day. At noon the gate of the citadel was closed, and the drums rolled loudly as a preface to the coming tragedy. Consternation spread through the town. Doors were carefully secured, shutters closed, and window-blinds pulled down. The streets became deserted, and a death-like silence prevailed. At last, just as three o'clock was striking, the gate of the fortress was reopened, and under the lofty archway came fourteen doomed men, each with a priest by his side. One-and-twenty had been condemned to death, but the Baron d'Escorval had eluded the executioner, and remorse or fear had tempered the Duc de Sairmeuse's thirst for blood. He and M. de Courtornieu had granted reprieves to six of the prisoners, and at that very moment a courier was starting for Paris with six petitions for pardon, signed by the military commission.

Chanlouineau was not among those for whom royal clemency was solicited. When he left his cell, without knowing whether his plan for saving the Baron d'Escorval had proved of any use or not, he counted and examined his thirteen comrades with keen anxiety. His eyes betrayed such an agony of anguish that the priest who accompanied him asked him in a whisper: "Whom are you looking for, my son?"

"For the Baron d'Escorval."

"He escaped last night."

"Ah! now I shall die content!" exclaimed the heroic peasant. And he died as he had sworn he would—without even changing color—calm and proud, the name of Marie-Anne upon his lips.

There was one woman, a fair young girl, who was not in the least degree affected by the tragic incidents attending the repression of the Montaignac revolt. This was Blanche de Courtornieu, who smiled as brightly as ever, and who, although her father exercised almost dictatorial power in conjunction with the Duc de Sairmeuse, did not raise as much as her little finger to save any one of the condemned prisoners from execution. These rebels had dared to stop her carriage on the public road, and this was an offense which she could neither forgive nor forget. She also knew that she had only owed her liberty to

Marie-Anne's intercession, and to a woman of such jealous pride this knowledge was galling in the extreme. Hence it was with bitter resentment that, on the morning following her arrival in Montaignac, she denounced to her father what she styled that Lacheneur girl's inconceivable arrogance, and the peasantry's frightful brutality. And when the Marquis de Courtornieu asked her if she would consent to give evidence against the Baron d'Escorval, she coldly replied that she considered it was her duty to do so. She was fully aware that her testimony would send the baron to the scaffold, and yet she did not hesitate a moment. True, she carefully concealed her personal spite, and declared she was only influenced by the interests of justice. Impartiality compels us to add, moreover, that she really believed the Baron d'Escorval to be a leader of the rebels. Chanlouineau had pronounced the name in her presence, and her error was all the more excusable as Maurice was usually known in the neighborhood by his Christian name. Had the young farmer called to "Monsieur Maurice" for instructions, Blanche would have understood the situation, but he had exclaimed, "M. d'Escorval," and hence her mistake.

After she had delivered to her father her written statement of what occurred on the highroad on the night of the revolt, the heiress assumed an attitude of seeming indifference, and when any of her friends chanced to speak of the rising, she alluded to the plebeian conspirators in tones of proud disdain. In her heart, however, she blessed this timely outbreak, which had removed her rival from her path. "For now," thought she, "the marquis will return to me, and I will make him forget the bold creature who bewitched him!" In this she was somewhat mistaken. True, Martial returned and paid his court, but he no longer loved her. He had detected the calculating ambition she had sought to hide under a mask of seeming simplicity. He had realized how vain and selfish she was, and his former admiration was now well-nigh transformed into repugnance; for he could but contrast her character with the noble nature of Marie-Anne, now lost to him forever. It was mainly the knowledge that Lacheneur's daughter could never be his which prompted him to a seeming reconciliation with Blanche. He said to himself that the duke, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu had exchanged a solemn pledge; that he, too, had given his word, and that after all Blanche was his promised wife. Was it worth while to break off the engagement? Would

he not be compelled to marry some day or another? His rank and name required him to do so, and such being the case what did it matter whom he married, since the only woman he had ever truly loved—the only woman he ever could love—was never to be his? To a man of Martial's education it was no very difficult task to pay proper court to the jealous Blanche, to surround her with every attention, and to affect a love he did not really feel; and, indeed, so perfectly did he play his part that Mademoiselle de Courtornieu might well flatter herself with the thought that she reigned supreme in his affections.

While Martial seemed wholly occupied with thoughts of his approaching marriage, he was really tortured with anxiety as to the fate which had overtaken the Baron d'Escorval and the other fugitives. The three members of the D'Escorval family, the abbe, Marie-Anne, Corporal Bavois, and four half-pay officers had all disappeared, leaving no trace behind them. This was very remarkable, as the search prescribed by MM. de Sairmeuse and Courtornieu had been conducted with feverish activity, greatly to the terror of its promoters. Still what could they do? They had imprudently excited the zeal of their subordinates, and now they were unable to allay it. Fortunately, however, all the efforts to discover the fugitives proved unsuccessful; and the only information that could be obtained came from a peasant, who declared that on the morning of the escape, just before daybreak, he had met a party of a dozen persons, men and women, who seemed to be carrying a dead body. This circumstance, taken in connection with the broken rope and the stains of blood at the bottom of the cliff, made Martial tremble. He was also strongly impressed by another circumstance, which came to light when the soldiers on guard the night of the escape were questioned as to what transpired. "I was on guard in the corridor communicating with the prisoner's quarters in the tower," said one of these soldiers, "when at about half-past two o'clock, just after Lacheneur had been placed in his cell, I saw an officer approaching me. I challenged him; he gave me the countersign, and, naturally, I let him pass. He went down the passage, and entered the empty room next to M. d'Escorval's. He remained there about five minutes."

"Did you recognize this officer?" asked Martial eagerly.

"No," answered the soldier. "He wore a large cloak, the collar of which was turned up so high that it hid his face to the very eyes."

"Whom could this mysterious officer have been?" thought Martial, racking his brains. "What was he doing in the room where I left the ropes?"

The Marquis de Courtornieu, present at the examination, seemed much disturbed. Turning to the witness, he asked him angrily: "How could you be ignorant that there were so many sympathizers with this movement among the garrison? You might have known that this visitor, who concealed his face so carefully, was an accomplice warned by Bavois, who had come to see if he needed a helping hand."

This seemed a plausible explanation, but it did not satisfy Martial. "It is very strange," he thought, "that M. d'Escorval has not even deigned to let me know he is in safety. The service I rendered him deserves that acknowledgment, at least."

Such was the young marquis's anxiety that, despite his repugnance for Chupin, the spy, he resolved to seek that arch-traitor's assistance, with the view of discovering what had become of the fugitives. It was no longer easy, however, to secure the old rascal's services, for since he had received the price of Lacheneur's blood—these twenty thousand francs which had so fascinated him—he had deserted the Duc de Sairmeuse's house, and taken up his quarters in a small inn at the outskirts of the town; where he spent his days alone in a large room on the second floor. At night-time he barricaded the door, and drank, drank, drank; and till daybreak he might be heard cursing and singing, or struggling against imaginary enemies. Still he dared not disobey the summons which a soldier brought him to hasten to the Hotel de Sairmeuse at once.

"I wish to discover what has become of the Baron d'Escorval," said Martial when the old spy arrived.

Chupin trembled, and a fleeting color dyed his cheeks. "The Montaignac police are at your disposal," he answered sulkily. "They, perhaps, can satisfy your curiosity, Monsieur le Marquis, but I don't belong to the police."

Was he in earnest, or was he merely simulating a refusal with the view of obtaining a high price for his services? Martial inclined to the latter opinion. "You shall have no reason to complain of my generosity," said he. "I will pay you well."

That word "pay" would have made Chupin's eyes gleam with delight a week before, but on hearing it now he at once flew into a furious passion. "So it was to tempt me again

that you summoned me here!" he exclaimed. "You would do much better to leave me quietly at my inn."

"What do you mean, you fool?"

But Chupin did not even hear the interruption. "People told me," quoth he, with increasing fury, "that, by betraying Lacheneur, I should be doing my duty and serving the king. I betrayed him, and now I am treated as if I had committed the worst of crimes. Formerly, when I lived by stealing and poaching, folks despised me, perhaps; but they didn't shun me as they do the pestilence. They called me rascal, robber, and the like; but they would drink with me all the same. To-day I've twenty thousand francs in my pocket, and yet I'm treated as if I were a venomous beast. If I approach any one he draws back, and if I enter a room, those who are there hasten out of it." At the recollection of the insults heaped upon him since Lacheneur's capture, the old rascal's rage reached a climax. "Was what I did so abominable?" he pursued. "Then why did your father propose it? The shame should fall on him. He shouldn't have tempted a poor man with wealth like that. If, on the contrary, I did my duty, let them make laws to protect me."

Martial perceived the necessity of reassuring this troubled mind. "Chupin, my boy," said he, "I don't ask you to discover M. d'Escorval in order to denounce him; far from it—I only want you to ascertain if any one at Saint-Pavin, or at Saint-Jean-de-Coche, knows of his having crossed the frontier."

The mention of Saint-Jean-de-Coche made Chupin shudder. "Do you want me to be murdered?" he exclaimed, remembering Balstain's vow. "I must let you know that I value my life now that I'm rich." And seized with a sort of panic he fled precipitately.

Martial was stupefied with astonishment. "One might really suppose that the rascal was sorry for what he had done," thought he.

If that were really the case, Chupin was not the only person afflicted with qualms of conscience, for both M. de Courtornieu and the Duc de Sairmeuse were secretly blaming themselves for the exaggeration of their first reports, and the manner in which they had magnified the proportions of the rebellion. They accused each other of undue haste, of neglecting the proper forms of process, and had to admit in their hearts that the sentences were most unjust. They each tried to make the

other responsible for the blood which had been spilled; and were certainly doing all that they could to obtain a pardon for the six prisoners who had been reprieved. But their efforts did not succeed; for one night a courier arrived at Montaignac, bearing the following laconic despatch: "The twenty-one convicted prisoners must all be executed." That is to say, the Duc de Richelieu and M. Decazes, with their colleagues of the council of ministers, had decided that the petitions for clemency must be refused.

This despatch was a terrible blow for the Duc de Sairmeuse and M. de Courtornieu. They knew, better than any one else, how little these poor fellows were deserving of death. They knew it would soon be publicly proved that two of these six men had taken no part whatever in the conspiracy. What was to be done? Martial wished his father to resign his authority; but the duke had not the strength of mind to do so. Besides, M. de Courtornieu encouraged him to retain his functions, remarking that no doubt all this was very unfortunate, but, since the wine was drawn, it was necessary to drink it; indeed, his grace could not now draw back without causing a terrible scandal.

Accordingly, the next day a dismal roll of drums was heard again, and the six doomed men, two of whom were known to be innocent, were led outside the walls of the citadel and shot, on the same spot where, only a week before, fourteen of their comrades had fallen.

The prime mover in the conspiracy had not, however, yet been tried. He had fallen into a state of gloomy despondency, which lasted during his whole term of imprisonment. He was terribly broken, both in body and mind. Once only did the blood mount to his pallid cheeks, and that was on the morning when the Duc de Sairmeuse entered the cell to examine him. "It was you who drove me to do what I did," exclaimed Lacheneur. "God sees us and judges us both!"

Unhappy man! his faults had been great: his chastisement was terrible. He had sacrificed his children on the altar of his wounded pride; and did not even have the consolation of pressing them to his heart and of asking their forgiveness before he died. Alone in his cell, he could not turn his mind from his son and daughter; but such was the terrible situation in which he had placed himself that he dared not ask what had become of them. Through a compassionate keeper, however, he learned

that nothing had been heard of Jean, and that it was supposed Marie-Anne had escaped to some foreign country with the D'Escorval family. When summoned before the court for trial, Lacheneur was calm and dignified in manner. He made no attempt at defense, but answered every question with perfect frankness. He took all the blame upon himself, and would not give the name of any one accomplice. Condemned to be beheaded, he was executed on the following day, walking to the scaffold and mounting to the platform with a firm step. A few seconds later the blade of the guillotine fell with a loud whir, and the rebellion of the fourth of March counted its twenty-first victim.

That same evening the townsfolk of Montaignac were busy talking of the magnificent rewards which were to be bestowed on the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu for their services to the royal cause, and a report was flying abroad to the effect that Martial and Mademoiselle Blanche were now to be married with great pomp, and with as little delay as possible.

XXIII

AFTER Lacheneur had been executed, the codictators, regretting, as we have already said, the precipitation with which they had sentenced many of the minor partizans of the revolt, sought to propitiate public opinion by treating the remaining prisoners with unexpected clemency. Out of a hundred peasants still confined in the citadel, only eighteen or twenty were tried, and the sentences pronounced upon them were light in the extreme; all the others were released. Major Carini, the leader of the military conspirators in Montaignac, had expected to lose his head, but to his own astonishment he was only sentenced to two years' imprisonment. This tardy indulgence did not, however, efface popular recollections of previous severity, and the townsfolk of Montaignac openly declared that if MM. de Sairmeuse and De Courtornieu were clement, it was only because they were afraid of the conse-

quences that might await continued tyranny. So thus it came to pass that people execrated them for their past cruelty, and despised them for their subsequent cowardice. However, both the duke and the marquis were ignorant of the true current of public opinion, and hurried on with their preparations for their children's wedding. It was arranged that the ceremony should take place on the 17th of April, at the village church of Sairmeuse, and that a grand entertainment should be given to the guests in the duke's chateau, which was indeed transformed into a fairy palace for the occasion.

A new priest, who had taken the Abbe Midon's place, celebrated the nuptial mass, and then addressed the newly-wedded pair in congratulatory terms. "You will be, you *must* be happy!" he exclaimed in conclusion, fully believing for the moment that he spoke the words of prophecy. And who would not have believed as he did? Where could two young people be found more richly dowered with all the attributes of worldly happiness?—youth, health, opulence, and rank. And yet, although the new marquise's eyes sparkled joyfully, the bridegroom seemed strangely preoccupied. Blanche was before him radiant with beauty, proud with success; but his mind, despite all efforts, wandered back to Marie-Anne—to the Marie-Anne he had lost, who had disappeared, whom he might never behold again. "Ah! if she had but loved him," thought Martial, "what happiness would have been his. But now he was bound for life to a woman whom he did not love."

At dinner, however, he succeeded in shaking off his sadness, thanks, perhaps, to the exhilarating influence of several glasses of champagne, and when the guests rose from table he had almost forgotten his forebodings. He was rising in his turn, when a servant approached him and whispered: "There is a young peasant in the hall who wishes to speak with Monsieur le Marquis. He would not give me his name."

"Wouldn't give his name?" ejaculated Martial. "Ah, well, on one's wedding-day one must grant an audience to everybody." And with a smile he descended the staircase. Beside the fragrant flowering plants with which the vestibule was lined he found a young man with a pale face, whose eyes glittered with feverish brilliancy. On recognizing him Martial could not restrain an exclamation of surprise. "Jean Lacheneur!" he exclaimed; "you imprudent fellow!"

Young Lacheneur stepped forward. "You thought you were

rid of me," he said, bitterly. "But you see you were mistaken. However, you can order your people to arrest me if you choose."

Martial's brow lowered on hearing these insulting words. "What do you want?" he asked coldly.

"I am to give you this on behalf of Maurice d'Escorval," replied Jean, drawing a letter from his pocket.

With an eager hand, Martial broke the seal; but scarcely had he glanced at the contents than he turned as pale as death and staggered back, exclaiming: "Infamous!"

"What am I to say to Maurice?" insisted Jean. "What do you intend to do?"

"Come—you shall see," replied the young marquis, seizing Jean by the arm and dragging him up the staircase. The expression of Martial's features had so changed during his brief absence that the wedding guests looked at him with astonishment when he reentered the grand saloon holding an open letter in one hand, and leading with the other a young peasant whom no one recognized. "Where is my father?" he asked, in a husky voice; "where is the Marquis de Courtornieu?"

The duke and the marquis were with Blanche in a little drawing-room leading out of the main hall. Martial hastened there, followed by a crowd of wondering guests, who, foreseeing a stormy scene, were determined to witness it. He walked straight toward M. de Courtornieu, who was standing by the fireplace, and handing him the letter: "Read!" said he, in a threatening voice.

M. de Courtornieu mechanically obeyed the injunction; but suddenly he turned livid; the paper trembled in his hands: he averted his glance, and was obliged to lean against the mantelpiece for support. "I don't understand," he stammered: "no, I don't understand."

The duke and Blanche had both sprung forward. "What is the matter?" they both asked in one breath; "what has happened?"

Martial's reply was to tear the letter from the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands, and to turn to his father with these words: "Listen to this note I have just received."

Three hundred people were assembled in the room, or clustering round the doorway, but the silence was so perfect that Martial's voice reached the farthest extremity of the grand hall as he read:

"Monsieur le Marquis—Upon the honor of your name, and in exchange for a dozen lines that threatened you with ruin, you promised us the Baron d'Escorval's life. You did, indeed, bring the ropes by which he was to make his escape, but they had been previously cut, and my father was precipitated on to the rocks below. You have forfeited your honor, sir. You have soiled your name with opprobrium, and while a drop of blood remains in my veins, I will leave no means untried to punish you for your cowardice and treason. By killing me you would, it is true, escape the chastisement I am reserving for you. I challenge you to fight with me. Shall I wait for you to-morrow on La Reche? At what hour? With what weapons? If you are the vilest of men, you can appoint a meeting, and then send your gendarmes to arrest me. That would be an act worthy of you. MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

On hearing these words the Duc de Sairmeuse was seized with despair. He saw the secret of the baron's flight made public, and his own political prospects ruined. "Hush!" he hurriedly exclaimed in a low voice; "hush, wretched fellow, you will ruin us!"

But Martial did not even seem to hear him. He finished his perusal, and then looking the Marquis de Courtornieu full in the face: "*Now*, what do you think?" he asked.

"I am still unable to comprehend," replied the old nobleman, coldly.

Martial raised his hand; and every one present believed that he was about to strike his father-in-law. "You don't comprehend," he exclaimed sarcastically. "Ah, well, if *you* don't, *I* do. I know who that officer was who entered the room where I deposited the ropes—and I know what took him there." He paused, crumpled the letter between his hands, and threw it in M. de Courtornieu's face, with these last words: "Here, take your reward, you cowardly traitor!"

Overwhelmed by this denouement the marquis sank back into an armchair, and Martial, still holding Jean Lacheneur by the arm, was on the point of leaving the room, when his young wife, wild with despair, tried to detain him. "You shall not go!" she exclaimed, "you can not! Where are you going? That young fellow with you is Jean Lacheneur. I recognize him. You want to join his sister—your mistress!"

Martial indignantly pushed his wife aside. "How dare you

insult the noblest and purest of women," he exclaimed. "Ah, well—yes—I am going to find Marie-Anne. Farewell!" And with these words he left the chateau.

XXIV

THE ledge of rock on which the Baron d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois rested on descending from the tower was not more than a yard and a half across its widest part. It sloped down toward the edge of the precipice, and its surface was so rugged and uneven that it was considered very imprudent to stand there, even in the daytime. Thus it will be understood that the task of lowering a man from this ledge, at dead of night, was perilous in the extreme. Before allowing the baron to descend, Bavois took every possible precaution to save himself from being dragged over the verge of the precipice by his companion's weight. He fixed his crowbar firmly in a crevice of the rock, seated himself, braced his feet against the bar, threw his shoulders well back, and then, feeling that his position was secure, he bid the baron let himself down. The sudden parting of the rope hurled the corporal against the tower wall, and then he rebounded forward on his knees. For an instant he hung suspended over the abyss, his hands clutching at the empty air. A nasty movement, and he would have fallen. But he possessed a marvelous power of will, and had faced danger so often in his life that he was able to restrain himself. Prudently, but with determined energy, he screwed his feet and knees into the crevices of the rock, feeling with his hands for some point of support; then gradually sinking on to one side, he at last succeeded in dragging himself from the verge of the precipice.

The effort had been a terrible one, his limbs were quite cramped, and he was obliged to sit down and rest himself. He fully believed that the baron had been killed by his fall, but this catastrophe did not produce much effect upon the old soldier, who had seen so many comrades fall by his side on fields of battle. What did amaze him, however, was the break-

ing of the rope—a rope so thick that one would have supposed it capable of sustaining the weight of ten men like the baron. It was too dark to examine the fragment remaining in his possession, but on feeling it at the lower end with his finger, the corporal was surprised to find it quite smooth and even, not rough and ragged as is usual after a break. "It must have been cut—yes, cut nearly through," exclaimed Bavois with an oath. And at the same time a previous incident recurred to his mind. "This," thought he, "explains the noise which the poor baron heard in the next room! And I said to him: 'Nonsense! it is a rat!'"

With the view of verifying his conjectures, Bavois passed the cord round about the crowbar and pulled at it with all his strength. It parted in three places. The discovery appalled him. A part of the rope had fallen with the baron, and it was evident that the remaining fragments, even if tied together, would not be long enough to reach the base of the rock. What was to be done? How could he escape? If he could not descend the precipice he must remain on the ledge from which there was no other mode of escape. "It's all up, corporal," he murmured to himself. "At daybreak they will find the baron's cell empty. They will poke their heads out of the window, and see you here perched like a stone saint on his pedestal. Of course you'll be captured, tried, and condemned, and have to take your turn in the ditches. Ready! Aim! Fire! That'll be the end of your story."

He stopped short, for a vague idea had just entered his mind, which he felt might lead to salvation. It had come to him in touching the rope which he and the baron had used in their descent from the latter's cell to the rocky ledge, and which, firmly attached to the bars above, hung down the side of the tower. "If you had that rope which hangs there, corporal," said he, you could tie it to these bits, and then the cord would be long enough to take you down the precipice. But how can one obtain it? If one goes back after it, one can't bring it down and come down again one's self at the same time. He pondered for a moment and then began talking to himself again. "Attention, corporal," said he. "You are going to knot the five pieces of rope you've got here together, and you're going to fasten them to your waist; next you're going to climb up to that window, hand over hand. Not an easy matter! A staircase would be preferable. But no matter, you mustn't be

finical, corporal. So you will climb up and find yourself in the cell again. What are you going to do there? A mere nothing. You will unfasten the cord secured to the window bars, you will tie it to this one and that will give you eighty feet of good strong rope. Then you will pass the rope about one of the bars that remain intact, you will tie the two ends together, and then the rope will be doubled. Next you must let yourself down here again, and when you are here, you will only have to untie one of the knots, and the rope will be at your service. Do you understand, corporal?"

The corporal did understand so well that in less than twenty minutes he was back again upon the narrow shelf of rock, having successfully accomplished the dangerous feat which he had planned. Not without a terrible effort, however, not without torn and bleeding hands and knees. Still he had succeeded in obtaining the rope, and now he was certain that he could make his escape from his dangerous position. He was chuckling gleefully at the prospect when suddenly he bethought himself of M. d'Escorval, whom he had forgotten first in his anxiety, and then in his joy. "Poor baron," murmured the corporal remorsefully. "I shall succeed in saving my miserable life, for which no one cares, but I was unable to save his. No doubt by this time his friends have carried him away."

As he uttered these words he leaned forward, and to his intense amazement perceived a faint light moving here and there in the depths below. What could have happened? Something extraordinary, that was evident; or else intelligent men like the baron's friends would never have displayed this light, which, if noticed from the citadel, would betray their presence and ruin them. However, the corporal's time was too precious to be wasted in idle conjectures. "Better go down on the double-quick," he said aloud, as if to spur on his courage. "Come, my friend, spit on your hands and be off!"

As he spoke the old soldier threw himself flat on his belly and crawled slowly backward to the verge of the precipice. The spirit was strong, but the flesh shuddered. To march upon a battery had been a mere pastime for him in days of imperial glory, but to face an unknown peril, to suspend one's life upon a cord, was a very different matter. Great drops of perspiration, caused by the horror of his situation, stood out upon his brow when he felt that half his body had passed over the edge of the precipice, and that the slightest movement

would now launch him into space. Still he did not hesitate, but allowed himself to glide on, murmuring, "If there is a God who watches over honest people, let Him open His eyes this instant!"

Providence was watching; and Bavois arrived at the end of his dangerous journey alive and safe. He fell like a mass of rock; and groaned aloud when at last, after a swift flight through space, he sank heavily on to the rugged soil below. For a minute he lay stunned and dizzy on the ground. He was rising when he felt himself seized by either arm. "No foolishness," he cried quickly. "It is I, Bavois."

But his captors did not loosen their hold. "How does it happen," asked one of them in a threatening tone, "that the Baron d'Escorval is precipitated half-way down the cliff and that you alight in safety a few moments later?"

The old soldier was too shrewd not to understand the import of this insinuation; and the indignation he felt gave him sufficient strength to free himself with a violent jerk from his captor's hand. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he cried; "so I pass for a traitor, do I? No, it is impossible; well, just listen to me." Then rapidly, but with great clearness, he recounted all the phases of his escape, his despair, his perilous situation, and the almost insurmountable obstacles which he had overcome. His tone was so sincere, the details he gave so circumstantial, that his questioners—two of the retired officers who had been waiting for the baron—at once held out their hands, sorry that they had wounded the feelings of a man so worthy of their respect and gratitude. "Forgive us, corporal," said one of them sadly. "Misery makes men suspicious and unjust, and we are very unhappy."

"No offense," he growled. "If I had trusted poor M. d'Escorval, he would be alive now."

"The baron still breathes," observed one of the officers.

This was such astounding news that for a moment Bavois was utterly confounded. "Ah! I will give my right hand, if necessary, to save him!" he exclaimed at last.

"If it is possible to save him, he will be saved, my friend. That worthy priest whom you see there is an excellent physician. He is examining M. d'Escorval's wounds at this moment. It was by his order that we procured and lighted that candle, which may bring our enemies upon us at any moment; but this is not a time for hesitation."

Bavois looked with all his eyes, but from where he was standing he could only distinguish a confused group of moving figures. On stepping forward, however, he perceived that Marie-Anne was holding a candle over the baron, who lay stretched upon the ground, his head reclining on his wife's knees. His face was not disfigured; but he was extremely pale, and his eyes were closed at intervals. He shuddered, and then the blood would trickle from his mouth. His clothing was hacked—literally hacked to pieces; and it was easy to see that he had been frightfully mauled and wounded. Kneeling beside the unconscious man, the Abbe Midon was dexterously stanching the blood and applying bandages, torn from the linen of those present. Maurice and one of the officers were assisting him. "Ah! if I had my hands on the scoundrel who cut the rope," cried the corporal with passionate indignation; "but patience. I shall have him yet."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Only too well!" He said no more. The abbe had done all it was possible to do, and was now lifting the wounded man a little higher on Madame d'Escorval's knees. This change of position elicited a moan which betrayed the baron's intense sufferings. He opened his eyes and faltered a few words—the first he had uttered. "Firmin!" he murmured, "Firmin!" This was the name of his former secretary, a devoted helpmate who had been dead for several years. It was evident that the baron's mind was wandering. Still he had some vague idea of his terrible situation, for in a stifled, almost inaudible, voice, he added: "Oh! how I suffer! Firmin, I will not fall into the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu alive. I would rather kill myself."

This was all; his eyes closed again, and his head fell back a dead weight. The officers clustering round believed that he had expired, and it was with poignant anxiety that they drew the abbe aside. "Is it all over?" they asked. "Is there any hope?"

The priest shook his head sadly, and pointing to heaven: "My hope is in God!" he said reverently.

The hour, the place, the catastrophe, the present danger, the threatening future, all combined to impart solemnity to the priest's few words; and so profound was the impression that for a moment these men, familiar with death and peril, stood in awed silence. Maurice, who approached, followed by Cor-

poral Bavois, brought them back to the exigencies of the situation. "Ought we not to make haste and carry my father away?" he asked. "Mustn't we be in Piedmont before evening?"

"Yes!" exclaimed one of the officers; "let us start at once."

But the priest did not move, and it was in a despondent voice that he remarked: "Any attempt to carry M. d'Escorval across the frontier in his present condition would cost him his life."

This seemed so inevitably a death-warrant for them all that they shuddered. "My God! what shall we do?" faltered Maurice. "What course shall we adopt?"

No one replied. It was clear that they hoped for salvation through the priest alone. He was lost in thought, and it was some time before he spoke. "About an hour's walk from here," he said at last, "beyond the Croix d'Arcy, lives a peasant on whom I can rely. His name is Poignot, and he was formerly in M. Lacheneur's employ. With the assistance of his three sons, he now tills quite a large farm. We must procure a litter and carry M. d'Escorval to this honest peasant's house."

"What?" interrupted one of the officers, "you want us to procure a litter at this hour of the night, and in this neighborhood?"

"It must be done."

"But won't it awake suspicion?"

"Most assuredly."

"The Montaignac police will follow us."

"I am certain of it."

"The baron will be recaptured?"

"No." The abbe spoke in the tone of a man who, having assumed all the responsibility, feels that he has a right to be obeyed. "When the baron has been conveyed to Poignot's house," he continued, "one of you gentlemen will take the wounded man's place on the litter; the others will carry him, and the party will remain together until you have reached Piedmontese territory. Then you must separate and pretend to conceal yourselves, but do it in such a way that you are seen everywhere."

The priest's simple plan was readily understood. The royalist emissaries must be thrown off the track; and at the very moment when it seemed to them that the baron was in the mountains, he would be safe in Poignot's house.

"One word more," added the cure. "The party which will accompany the pretended baron must look as much like the people one would expect to find with him as possible. So

Mademoiselle Lacheneur will go with you, and Maurice also. Again, people know that I would not leave the baron; and as my priestly robe would attract attention, one of you must assume it. God will forgive the deception on account of its worthy motive."

It was now necessary to procure the litter; and the officers were trying to decide where they should go to obtain it when Corporal Bavois interrupted them. "Give yourselves no uneasiness," he remarked; "I know an inn not far from here where I can procure one."

He started off on the run, and a few minutes later returned with a small litter, a thin mattress, and a coverlid. He had thought of everything. The baron was lifted carefully from the ground and placed on the mattress—a long and difficult operation, which, in spite of extreme caution, provoked many terrible groans from the wounded man. When everything was ready, each officer took an end of the litter, and the little procession, headed by the abbe, started on its way. They were obliged to proceed slowly, as the least jolting increased the baron's sufferings. Still they made some progress, and by daybreak they were about half-way to Poignot's house. They then chanced to meet some peasants going to their daily toil. The latter paused to look at them, and when the group had passed by stood gazing curiously after these strange folks who were apparently carrying a dead body. However, these meetings did not at all seem to worry the Abbe Midon. At all events he made no attempt to avoid them. At last they came in sight of Poignot's cottage. There was a little grove not far from the house, and here the party halted, the priest bidding his companions conceal themselves while he went forward to reconnoitre and confer with the man upon whose decision the safety of the whole party depended.

As the priest approached the house, a short, slim peasant with gray hair and a sunburnt face emerged from the stable. This was Father Poignot himself. "What! is this you, Monsieur le Cure!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Heavens! how pleased my wife will be. We have a great favor to ask of you—" And then, without giving the abbe an opportunity to open his lips, the farmer began to relate his perplexities. The night of the revolt he had given shelter to a poor fellow who had received an ugly swordthrust. Neither his wife nor himself knew how to dress the wound, and he did not dare to send

for a doctor. "And this wounded man," he added, "is Jean Lacheneur, my old employer's son."

This recital made the priest feel very anxious. This peasant had already given an asylum to one wounded conspirator, but would he consent to receive another? He could not say, but his voice trembled as he presented his petition. The farmer turned very pale and shook his head gravely more than once, while the priest was speaking. When the abbe had finished, he coldly asked: "Do you know, sir, that I incur a great risk by converting my house into a hospital for these rebels?" The abbe dared not answer. "They told me," continued Father Poignot, "that I was a coward because I would not join in the revolt. Such was not my opinion. Now, however, I choose to shelter these wounded men. In my opinion, it requires quite as much courage to do that as to go and fight."

"Ah! you are a brave fellow!" cried the abbe.

"Never mind about that, but bring M. d'Escorval here. There is no one but my wife and boys, and they won't betray him!"

The offer was at once accepted, and half an hour later the baron was lying in a small loft, where Jean Lacheneur was already installed. From the window the Abbe Midon and Madame d'Escorval watched the little party, organized for the purpose of deceiving the Duc de Sairmeuse's spies, as it moved rapidly away. Corporal Bavois, with his head bound up with blood-stained linen, had taken the baron's place on the litter carried by the retired officers. These latter only knew the baron by name and reputation. But then he was the friend of their former ruler—the friend of that great captain whom they had made their idol, and they rejoiced with all their hearts when they saw him reposing under Father Poignot's roof in comparative security. After this there was the task of misleading the government emissaries, and they took various skilful precautions, not knowing that they were quite unnecessary. Public sentiment had declared itself in an unmistakable manner, and the police did not ascertain a single detail of the escape. They did not even hear of the little party that traveled nearly three leagues in the full light of day, bearing a wounded man upon a litter. Among the two thousand peasants who believed that this wounded man was the Baron d'Escorval, there was not one who turned informer or made an indiscreet remark.

The fugitives were ignorant of this willing connivance, and on approaching the frontier, which they heard was strictly guarded, they became extremely cautious. They waited until nightfall before presenting themselves at a lonely inn, where they hoped to procure a guide to lead them through the mountain passes. Sad news awaited them there, for the innkeeper informed them of the executions that had taken place that day at Montaignac, giving the particulars as he had heard them from an eye-witness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he knew nothing of M. d'Escorval's flight or of M. Lacheneur's arrest. But he was well acquainted with Chanlouineau, and was quite inconsolable concerning the death of that "handsome young fellow, the best farmer in the country."

Finding this man's views so favorable, the officers, who had left the litter a short distance from the inn, decided to confide in him, at least in some degree. "We are carrying one of our wounded comrades," they said. "Can you guide us across the frontier to-night?"

The innkeeper replied that he would do so willingly, that he could promise to take them safely past the military posts; but that he could not think of starting before the moon rose. At midnight the fugitives were on their way, and at daybreak they set foot on the territory of Piedmont. They had dismissed their guide some time before. They now proceeded to break the litter to pieces; and handful by handful cast the wool of the mattress to the wind.

"Our task is accomplished," said one of the officers to Maurice. "We will now return to France. May God protect you! Farewell!"

It was with tears in his eyes that Maurice parted from these brave fellows who had proved so instrumental in saving his father's life. Now he was the sole protector of Marie-Anne, who, pale and overcome with fatigue and emotion, trembled on his arm. But no—for Corporal Bavois still lingered by his side. "And you, my friend," he asked sadly, "what are you going to do?"

"Follow you," replied the old soldier. "I have a right to a home with you; that was agreed between your father and myself! so don't hurry, for the young lady does not seem well, and I can see a village only a short distance off."

XXV

ESSENTIALLY a woman in grace and beauty, as well as in devotion and tenderness, Marie-Anne, as we have shown, was moreover capable of truly virile bravery. Her energy and coolness during those trying days had been the admiration and astonishment of all around her. But human endurance has its limits, and after excessive efforts there invariably comes a moment when the shrinking flesh fails the firmest will. Thus, when Marie-Anne tried to resume her journey she found that her strength was exhausted; her swollen feet and limbs scarcely supported her, her head whirled, and she shivered feverishly. Maurice and the old soldier were both obliged to support her, almost to carry her; but fortunately they were not far from a village, as was evident from an old church tower just discernible through the morning mist.

Soon, however, they distinguished several cottages, and with the prospect of speedy rest before them they were hastening forward, when suddenly Bavois stopped short. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he exclaimed; "why, I'm in uniform! It would excite suspicion at once if I went into the village dressed like this; before we had a chance to sit down, the Piedmontese gendarmes would arrest us." He reflected for a moment, twirling his mustache furiously; then, in a tone that would have made a passer-by tremble, he remarked: "All things are fair in love and war. The next person who passes—"

"But I have money with me," interrupted Maurice, unbuckling a belt filled with gold, which he had put on under his clothing on the night of the revolt.

"Eh! then we are fortunate!" cried Bavois. "Give me some, and I will soon find a shop where I can purchase a change of clothing."

He started; and it was not long before he reappeared clad in peasant's garb, his thin, weazened countenance well-nigh hidden by a large, broad-brimmed slouch-hat. "Now, steady,

forward, march!" he said to Maurice and Marie-Anne, who scarcely recognized him in this disguise.

What they had taken to be a mere village proved to be almost a small town, called Saliente, as they almost immediately afterward ascertained from a sign-post. The fourth house they met with was a hostelry, the Traveler's Rest. They went in, and at once asked the hostess to take the young lady to a room, and to assist her in undressing. While these instructions were being complied with, Maurice and the corporal proceeded to the dining-room and ordered something to eat. Refreshments were served at once, but the glances cast upon the new arrivals were by no means friendly. They were evidently regarded with suspicion. A tall man, who was apparently the landlord, hovered round them, and at last embraced a favorable opportunity to ask their names. "My name is Dubois," replied Maurice without the slightest hesitation. "I am traveling on business, and this man with me is a farmer of mine."

The landlord seemed somewhat reassured by this reply. "And what is your business?" he inquired.

"I have come into this land of inquisitive people to buy mules," laughed Maurice, striking his belt of money.

On hearing the jingle of the coin the landlord deferentially raised his cap. Breeding mules was the chief industry of the district. This would-be purchaser was very young, but he had a well-filled purse, and that was enough. "You will excuse me," resumed the landlord in quite a different tone. "You see, we are obliged to be very careful. There has been some trouble at Montaignac."

The imminence of the peril and the responsibility devolving upon him gave Maurice unusual assurance; and it was in the most careless, offhand manner possible that he concocted quite a plausible story to explain his early arrival on foot with his wife, who had been taken poorly on the way. He congratulated himself upon his address, but the old corporal was far from satisfied. "We are too near the frontier to bivouac here," he grumbled. "As soon as the young lady is on her feet again we must hurry on."

He believed, and Maurice hoped, that twenty-four hours' rest would set Marie-Anne right again. But they were both mistaken. She could not move, but remained in a state of torpor from which it was impossible to rouse her. When she was spoken to she made no reply, and it seemed very doubtful

whether she could even hear and understand. Fortunately the landlord's mother proved to be a good, kind-hearted old woman, who would not leave the so-called Madame Dubois's bedside, but nursed her with the greatest care during three long days, while Marie-Anne remained in this strange and alarming condition. When at last she spoke, Maurice could at first scarcely understand the import of her words. "Poor girl!" she sighed; "poor, wretched girl!" In point of fact she was alluding to herself. By a phenomenon which often manifests itself after a crisis in which reason has been temporarily imperiled, it seemed to her that it was some one else who had been the victim of all these misfortunes, the recollection of which gradually returned to her like the memory of a painful dream. What strange and terrible events had taken place since that August Sunday when, on leaving church with her father, she first heard of the Duc de Sairmeuse's return to France. And that was only nine months ago. What a difference between the past—when she lived happy and envied in that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse, of which she believed herself the mistress—and the present, when she found herself lying in the comfortless room of a miserable country inn, attended by an old woman whom she did not know, and with no other protectors than her proscribed lover and an old soldier—a deserter whose life was in constant peril. Hope, fortune, and future happiness had all been wrecked, and she had not even saved her honor. But was she alone responsible? Who was it that had forced her to play that odious part with Maurice, Martial, and Chanlouineau? As this last name darted through her mind, she recalled with startling clearness all the incidents of her last meeting with the young farmer. She saw him at her feet in that dingy cell of the citadel at Montaignac; she felt his first and only kiss upon her cheek, and remembered that he had given her a second letter, saying as he did so: "You will read this when I am dead."

She might read it now, for he had already cruelly expiated his share in her father's enterprise. But then what had become of it? She had not given it a thought till now; but at present, raising herself up in bed, she exclaimed in an eager, imperious voice: "My dress, give me my dress."

The old nurse obeyed her, and Marie-Anne could not restrain an exclamation of delight when, on examining the pocket, she found the letter there. She opened it and read it slowly, then,

sinking back on her pillows, she burst into tears. Maurice hastily approached her. "What is the matter?" he inquired anxiously. Her only reply was to hand him the missive.

Chanlouineau, it should be remembered, was only a poor peasant, scarcely possessing the rudiments of education, as his letter (written on common paper and closed with a huge wafer, especially purchased from a grocer in Sairmeuse) evinced plainly enough. The heavy, labored, distorted characters had evidently been traced by a man who was more at home when guiding a plow than a pen. There was but one straight line, and every third word, at least, was misspelt. And yet the thoughts expressed were noble and generous, well worthy of the true heart that had beat in the young farmer's breast.

"Marie-Anne"—so the letter began. "The outbreak is at hand, and whether it succeeds or fails, at all events, I shall die. I decided that on the day when I learned that you could marry no other man than Maurice d'Escorval. The conspiracy can not succeed; and I understand your father well enough to know that he will not survive defeat. And if Maurice and your brother should both be killed, what would become of you? Oh, my God, would you not be reduced to beggary? The thought has haunted me continually. I have reflected, and this is my last will: I give and bequeath to you all my property, everything that I possess: My house, the Borderie, with its gardens and vineyards, the woodland and pastures of Berarde, and five lots of lands at Valrollier. An inventory of this property and of the other possessions I leave to you is deposited with the notary at Sairmeuse. You can accept this bequest without fear, for I have no relatives, and am at liberty to dispose of my belongings as I please. If you do not wish to remain in France, the property can be sold for at least forty thousand francs. But it would, it seems to me, be better for you to remain in your own province. The house on the Borderie is comfortable and convenient, for I have had it thoroughly repaired. Upstairs you will find a room that has been fitted up by the best upholsterer in Montaignac. I intended it for you. Under the hearthstone in this same room I have deposited a box containing three hundred and twenty-seven louis d'or and one hundred and forty-six livres. If you refuse this gift, it will be because you scorn me even after I am dead. Accept it, if not for your own sake, for the sake of—I dare not finish, but you will un-

derstand my meaning only too well. If Maurice is not killed, and I shall try my best to stand between him and danger, he will marry you. Then, perhaps, you will be obliged to ask his consent in order to accept my gift. I hope that he will not refuse his permission. One is not jealous of the dead! Besides, he knows well enough that you scarcely ever vouchsafed a glance to the poor peasant who loved you so much. Do not be offended at anything I have said, I am in such agony that I can not weigh my words. Farewell, Marie-Anne. Farewell forever. CHANLOUINEAU."

Maurice read this letter carefully, at times pausing with suppressed emotion. After finishing its perusal he remained silent for a moment, and then in a husky voice exclaimed: "You can not refuse; it would be wrong." Then, fearing lest he might betray his feelings, he hastily left the room. Chanlouineau's words had evidently made a deep impression on his mind. This noble peasant had saved their lives at the Croix d'Arcy, he had wrested the Baron d'Escorval from the hands of the executioner, and he had never allowed either a complaint or a reproach to escape his lips. His abnegation had been sublime; and yet, as if what he had done in life were not sufficient, he sought to protect the woman he loved even after he was dead. When Maurice recalled all that he and Marie-Anne owed to Chanlouineau, he could not help reproaching himself with inferiority and unworthiness. But, good heavens! what if this same comparison should arise in Marie-Anne's mind as well? How could he compete with the memory of such nobility of soul and such self-sacrifice? Ay, Chanlouineau was mistaken; one may, perhaps, be jealous of the dead! However Maurice took good care to conceal his anxiety, and when he returned to Marie-Anne's room his face was calm and even cheerful.

Although, as we have seen, Marie-Anne had recovered the full possession of her mental faculties, her strength had not yet returned. She was almost unable to sit up; and Maurice had to relinquish all thought of leaving Saliente for the present. The so-called Madame Dubois's persistent weakness began to astonish the old nurse, and her faith in herbs, gathered by moonlight, was considerably shaken. Fortunately, however, Bavois had succeeded in finding a medical man in the neighborhood—a physician of great ability, who, after being at one time attached to Prince Eugene Beauharnais's viceregal court

at Milan, had, for political reasons, been forced to take refuge in this secluded spot. The corporal's discovery was a happy one, for in these days the smaller towns and villages of Italy rarely possessed any other doctors than some ignorant barber, who invariably treated all complaints with a lancet and a stock of leeches. Bavois's physician was at once summoned, and he promptly made his appearance. He was a man of uncertain age, with a furrowed brow and a keen and piercing glance. After visiting the sick-room, he drew Maurice aside. "Is this young lady really your wife, Monsieur—Dubois?" he asked, hesitating so strangely over his name, Dubois, that Maurice's face crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"I do not understand your question," he retorted angrily.

"I beg your pardon, of course, but you seem very young for a married man, and your hands are too soft for a farmer's. And when I spoke to this young lady about her husband, she turned scarlet. The man who accompanies you, moreover, has terrible mustaches for a farmer, and besides you must remember that there have been troubles across the frontier at Montaignac."

From crimson Maurice had turned white. He felt that he was discovered—that he was in this man's power. What should he do? What was the use of denial? At times it is only prudent to confess, and extreme confidence often meets with sympathy and protection. He weighed these considerations in his mind, and then in an anxious voice replied: "You are not mistaken, monsieur. My friend and myself are both fugitives, undoubtedly condemned to death in France by this time." And then, without giving the doctor an opportunity to respond, he briefly narrated the terrible events that had recently happened at Sairmeuse. He neither concealed his own name nor Marie-Anne's and when his recital was completed, the physician, whom his confidence had plainly touched, warmly shook his hand.

"It is just as I supposed," said the medical man. "Believe me, Monsieur Dubois, you must not tarry here. What I have discovered others will discover as well. And, above everything, don't warn the hotel-keeper of your departure. He has not been deceived by your explanation. Self-interest alone has kept his mouth shut. He has seen your money, and so long as you spend it at his house he will hold his tongue; but if he discovers that you are going away, he will probably betray you."

"Ah! sir, but how is it possible for us to leave this place?"

"In two days the young lady will be on her feet again," interrupted the physician. "And take my advice. At the next village, stop and give your name to Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"Ah! sir," exclaimed Maurice, "have you considered the advice you offer me? How can I, a proscribed man—a man condemned to death perhaps—how can I obtain, how can I display the proofs of identity necessary for marriage?"

"Excuse me," observed the physician, shaking his head, "but you are no longer in France, Monsieur d'Escorval; you are in Piedmont."

"Another difficulty!"

"No, because in this country people marry, or at least they can marry, without all the formalities that cause you so much anxiety."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Maurice.

"Yes, if you can find a consenting priest, when he has inscribed your name on his parish register and given you a certificate, you will be so undoubtedly married, Mademoiselle Lacheneur and yourself, that the court of Rome would never grant you a divorce."

"That may be," said Maurice hesitatingly, "but how could I find a priest—"

The physician was silent, and it might have been supposed he was blaming himself for meddling with matters that did not concern him. Suddenly, however, he abruptly said: "Listen to me attentively, Monsieur d'Escorval. I am about to take my leave, but before I go I shall find occasion to recommend your wife to take as much exercise as possible—I will do this in the landlord's presence. Consequently, on the day after tomorrow, Wednesday, you must hire mules, and you, Mademoiselle Lacheneur, and your old friend, the soldier, must start from the hotel as if you were going on a pleasure excursion. You will push on to Vigano, three leagues from here, where I live. Then I will take you to a priest, one of my friends; and upon my recommendation he will perform the marriage ceremony. Now, reflect, shall I expect you on Wednesday?"

"Oh, yes, yes. How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

"By not thanking me at all. See, here is the innkeeper; you are M. Dubois again."

Maurice was intoxicated with joy. He understood the irregularity of such a marriage, but he knew it would reassure Marie-Anne's troubled conscience. Poor girl! she was suffer-

ing an agony of remorse. It was that which was killing her. However, he did not speak to her on the matter, fearing lest something might occur to interfere with the project. But the old physician had not spoken lightly, and everything took place as he had promised. The priest at Vigano blessed the marriage of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and, after inscribing their names upon the church register, he gave them a certificate, which the physician and Corporal Bavois signed as witnesses. That same evening the mules were sent back to Saliente, and the fugitives resumed their journey. The Abbe Midon had advised them to reach Turin as quickly as possible. "It is a large city," he had said when bidding them good-by near Father Poignot's house; "you will be lost in the crowd. I have several friends there, whose names and addresses are on this paper. Go to them, for through them I will try to send you news of M. d'Escorval."

So it was toward Turin that Maurice, Marie-Anne, and Corporal Bavois directed their steps. Their progress was slow, however, for they were obliged to avoid the more frequented roads and renounce all ordinary modes of transport. Still the fatigue of travel, instead of exhausting Marie-Anne, seemed to revive her, and when five or six days had elapsed the color came back to her cheeks, and her strength had fully returned. "Fate seems to have abandoned the pursuit," said Maurice one day. "Who knows but what the future may have many compensations in store for us!"

But he was mistaken. Fate far from forgetting them had merely granted them a short respite. One April morning the fugitives stopped to breakfast at an inn in the outskirts of a large town. Maurice had finished eating, and was just leaving the table to settle with the landlady, when Marie-Anne uttered a loud shriek and fell back on her chair. She held in her hand a French newspaper about a fortnight old, which she had found lying on the sideboard where some traveler had probably left it. Maurice seized the print rapidly, and read as follows: "Lacheneur, the leader of the revolt in Montaignac, was executed yesterday. The miserable mischief-maker exhibited on the scaffold the audacity for which he had always been famous."

"My father has been put to death!" cried Marie-Anne, "and I—his daughter—was not there to receive his last farewell!" She rose, and in an imperious voice: "I will go no farther,"

she said; "we must turn back now without losing an instant. I wish to return to France."

To return to France was to expose themselves to frightful peril. What good would it do? Was not the misfortune irreparable? So Corporal Bavois suggested, very timidly it is true, for the old soldier trembled at the thought that they might suspect him of being afraid. But Maurice would not listen. He shuddered. He did not know what had transpired since their flight, but it seemed to him that the Baron d'Escorval must have been discovered and rearrested at the same time that Lacheneur was captured. Accordingly they at once procured a vehicle to convey them to the frontier. One important question, however, remained to be decided. Should Maurice and Marie-Anne make their marriage public? She wished to do so, but Maurice with tears in his eyes entreated her to conceal it. "Our marriage certificate will not silence those who are disposed against us," said he. "Let us keep our secret for the present. No doubt we shall only remain in France for a few days." Unfortunately, Marie-Anne yielded. "Since you wish it," said she, "I will obey you. No one shall know of it."

It was the evening of the 17th of April, the same day that Martial was married to Blanche, when the fugitives at last reached Father Poignot's house. Maurice and Corporal Bavois were disguised as peasants, and the old soldier had made a sacrifice that drew tears from his eyes; he had shaved off his mustaches.

XXVI

WHEN the Abbe Midon and Martial de Sairmeuse held their conference, to decide upon the arrangements for the Baron d'Escorval's escape, a difficulty presented itself which threatened to break off the negotiations. "Return my letter," said Martial, "and I will save the baron."

"Save the baron," replied the abbe, "and your letter shall be returned."

The idea that any one should suppose him to be influenced

by danger when in reality he was only yielding to Marie-Anne's tears, angered Martial beyond endurance. "These are my last words, sir," he retorted, emphatically. "Give me the letter now, and I swear to you, by the honor of my name, that I will do everything that is possible for any human being to do to save the baron. If you distrust my word, good evening."

The situation was desperate, the danger imminent, the time limited, and Martial's tone betrayed an inflexible determination. The abbe could not hesitate. He drew the letter from his pocket and handing it to Martial: "Here it is, sir," he said, solemnly, "remember that you have pledged the honor of your name."

"I will remember it, Monsieur le Cure. Go and obtain the ropes."

Thus the abbe's sorrow and amazement were intense, when, after the baron's terrible fall, Maurice declared that the cord had been cut beforehand. And yet the priest could not make up his mind that Martial was guilty of such execrable duplicity, which is rarely found in men under twenty-five years of age. However, no one suspected the abbe's secret thoughts. It was with perfect composure that he dressed the baron's wounds and made arrangements for the flight, though not until he saw M. d'Escorval installed in Poignot's house did he breathe freely. The fact that the baron had been able to endure the journey proved that he retained a power of vitality for which the priest had scarcely dared to hope. Some way must now be discovered to procure the surgical instruments and pharmaceutical remedies which the wounded man's condition would necessitate. But where and how could they be procured? The police kept a close watch over all the medical men and druggists in Montaignac, in hopes of discovering the wounded conspirators through one or the other medium. However, the cure had for ten years acted as physician and surgeon for the poor of his parish, and he possessed an almost complete set of surgical instruments, and a well-filled medicine chest. Accordingly at nightfall he put on a long blue blouse, concealed his features under a large slouch-hat, and wended his way toward Sairmeuse. There was not a single light in the parsonage; Bibiane, the old housekeeper, having gone out to gossip with some of the neighbors. The priest effected an entrance into the house by forcing the lock of the garden door; he speedily found the things he wanted and was able to retire without having been

perceived. That night the abbe hazarded a cruel but indispensable operation. His heart trembled, but although he had never before attempted so difficult a task, the hand that held the knife was firm. "It is not upon my weak powers that I rely," he murmured, "I have placed my trust in One who is on High."

His faith was rewarded. Three days later the wounded man, after a comfortable night, seemed to regain consciousness. His first glance was for his devoted wife, who was sitting by the bedside; his first word was for his son. "Maurice?" he asked.

"Is in safety," replied the abbe. "He must be on the road to Turin."

M. d'Escorval's lips moved as if he were murmuring a prayer; then, in a feeble voice: "We owe you a debt of gratitude which we can never pay," he murmured, "for I think I shall pull through."

He did "pull through," but not without terrible suffering, and not without severe lapses that made those around him tremble with anxiety. Jean Lacheneur was more fortunate, for he was on his legs by the end of the week.

On the evening of the seventeenth of April the abbe was seated in the loft reading a newspaper to the baron when suddenly the door was quietly opened, and one of the Poignot boys looked into the room. He did not speak, however, but merely gave the cure a glance, and then quickly withdrew.

The priest finished the paragraph he was perusing, laid down the paper, and went out on to the landing. "What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Ah!" answered the young fellow, "M. Maurice, Mademoiselle Lacheneur, and the old corporal have just arrived; they want to come upstairs."

Three bounds and the abbe reached the ground floor. "You imprudent children!" he exclaimed, addressing the three travelers, "what has induced you to return here?" Then turning to Maurice: "Isn't it enough that your father has nearly died for you and through you? Are you so anxious for his recapture that you return here to set our enemies on his track? Be off at once!"

Utterly abashed, it was as much as Maurice could do to falter his excuses; uncertainty, he said, had seemed worse to him than death; he had heard of M. Lacheneur's execution;

he had started off at once without reflection and only asked to see his father and embrace his mother before leaving again.

The priest was inflexible. "The slightest emotion might kill your father," he declared; "and I should cause your mother the greatest anxiety if I told her of your return, and the dangers to which you have foolishly exposed yourself. Come, go at once, and cross the frontier again this very night."

The scene had been witnessed by Jean Lacheneur, who now approached. "The time has come for me to take *my* leave," said he, "I shall go with Maurice. But I scarcely think that the highway's the right place for my sister. You would cap all your kindness, Monsieur le Cure, if you would only persuade Father Poignot to let her remain here, and if you would watch over her yourself."

The abbe deliberated for a moment, and then hurriedly replied: "So be it; but go at once; your name is not on the proscribed list. You will not be pursued."

Suddenly separated from his wife in this fashion, Maurice wished to confer with her, to give her some parting advice; but the abbe did not allow him an opportunity to do so. "Go, go at once," he insisted. "Farewell!"

The priest's intentions were excellent, no doubt, but in point of fact he was too hasty. At the very moment when Maurice stood sorely in need of wise and temperate counsel he was handed over to Jean Lacheneur's pernicious influence. Scarcely were they outside the house than the latter remarked: "We have to thank the Sairmeuses and the Marquis de Courtornieu for all this. I don't even know where they have thrown my father's corpse. I, his son, was even debarred from embracing him before he was traitorously murdered." He spoke in a harsh, bitter voice, laughing the while in a strange discordant fashion. "And yet," he continued, "if we climbed that hill we should be able to see the Chateau de Sairmeuse brightly illuminated. They are celebrating the marriage of Martial de Sairmeuse and Blanche de Courtornieu. We are friendless outcasts, succorless and shelterless, but they are feasting and making merry."

Less than this would have sufficed to rekindle Maurice's wrath. Yes, these Sairmeuses and these Courtornieus had killed the elder Lacheneur, and they had betrayed the Baron d'Escorval, and delivered him up—a mangled corpse—to his suffering relatives. "It would be a rightful vengeance to disturb their

merrymaking now, and in the midst of hundreds of assembled guests denounce their cruelty and perfidy." "I will start at once," exclaimed Maurice, "I will challenge Martial in the presence of the revelers."

But Jean interrupted him. "No, don't do that! The cowards would arrest you. Write to the young marquis, and I will take your letter."

Corporal Bavois, who heard the conversation, did not make the slightest attempt to oppose this foolish enterprise. Indeed, he thought the undertaking quite natural, under the circumstances, and esteemed his young friends all the more for their rashness. They all three entered the first wine-shop they came across, and Maurice wrote the challenge which was confided to Jean Lacheneur.

The only object which Jean had in view was to disturb the bridal ball at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. He merely hoped to provoke a scandal which would disgrace Martial and his relatives in the eyes of all their friends; for he did not for one moment imagine that the young marquis would accept Maurice's challenge. While waiting for Martial in the hall of the chateau, he sought to compose a fitting attitude, striving to steel himself against the sneering scorn with which he expected the young nobleman would receive him. Martial's kindly greeting was so unlooked for that Jean was at first quite disconcerted, and he did not recover his assurance until he perceived how cruelly Maurice's insulting letter made the marquis suffer. When the latter seized him by the arm and led him upstairs, he offered no resistance; and as they crossed the brightly-lighted drawing-rooms and passed through the throng of astonished guests, his surprise was so intense that he forgot both his heavy shoes and peasant's blouse. Breathless with anxiety, he wondered what was coming. Then standing on the threshold of the little saloon leading out of the grand hall he heard Martial read Maurice d'Escorval's letter aloud, and finally saw him, frantic with passion, throw the missive in his father-in-law's face. It might have been supposed that these incidents did not in the least affect Jean Lacheneur, who stood by cold and unmoved, with compressed lips and downcast eyes. However, appearances were deceitful, for in reality his heart throbbed with exultation; and if he lowered his eyes, it was only to conceal the joy that sparkled in them. He had not hoped for so prompt and so terrible a revenge.

Nor was this all. After brutally pushing Blanche, his newly-wedded wife, aside when she attempted to detain him, Martial again seized Jean Lacheneur's arm. "Now," said he, "follow me!"

Jean still obeyed him without uttering a word. They again crossed the grand hall, and on passing out into an anteroom, Martial took a candle burning on a side table, and opened a little door leading to a private staircase. "Where are you taking me?" inquired Jean.

Martial, in his haste, was already a third of the way up the flight. "Are you afraid?" he asked, turning round.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "If you put it in that way, let us go on," he coldly replied.

They entered the room which Martial had occupied since taking possession of the chateau. It was the same room that had once belonged to Jean Lacheneur; and nothing in it had been changed. The whilom steward's son recognized the brightly-flowered curtains, the figures on the carpet, and even an old armchair ensconced wherein he had read many a novel in secret. Martial hastened to a small writing-desk, and drew therefrom a folded paper which he slipped into his pocket. "Now," said he, "let us be off. We must avoid another scene. My father and my wife will be looking for me. I will explain everything when we are outside."

They hastily descended the staircase, passed through the gardens, and soon reached the long avenue. Then Jean Lacheneur suddenly paused. "After all," said he, "it was scarcely necessary for me to wait so long for a simple yes or no. Have you decided? What answer am I to give Maurice d'Escorval?"

"None at all. You will take me to him. I must see him and speak with him in order to justify myself. Let us proceed!"

But Jean did not move. "What you ask is impossible!" he replied.

"Why so?"

"Because Maurice is pursued. If he is captured, he will be tried and undoubtedly condemned to death. He is now in a safe retreat, and I have no right to disclose it." In point of fact, Maurice's safe retreat, for the time being, was only a neighboring wood, where, in the corporal's company, he was waiting for Jean's return. But the latter could not resist the temptation to make this insinuating remark, which, by reason

of its covert character, was far more insulting than if he had simply said: "We fear informers!"

Strange as it may appear, and proud and violent as was Martial's nature, he did not resent the insult. "So you distrust me!" he merely said. Jean Lacheneur was silent—another insult. "And yet," insisted Martial, "after what you've just seen and heard you can't possibly suspect me of having cut the ropes I carried to the baron."

"No! I'm convinced that *you* didn't do it."

"You saw how I punished the man who had dared to compromise my honor. And this man is the father of the girl I married to-day."

"Oh, I saw and heard everything, but as for taking you to Maurice, I must still reply: 'Impossible!'"

No doubt the younger Lacheneur's severity was unjust; however, Martial did not rebel against it. He merely drew from his pocket the paper which he had taken from his desk a few minutes previously, and handed it to Jean. "You doubt my word," he said grimly. "I shall not forget to punish those whose fault it is. However, here is a proof of my sincerity which I expect you to give to Maurice, and which must convince even you."

"What proof is it?"

"Why, the very letter in exchange for which we facilitated the baron's escape. A presentiment I can't explain prevented me from burning it, and now I'm very glad I didn't. Take it, and do what you choose with it."

Any one but Jean Lacheneur would have appreciated the young marquis's candor, and have been touched by the confidence he displayed. But Jean's hatred was implacable, and the more humble his enemy showed himself, the more determined he was to carry out the project of vengeance maturing in his brain. His only reply to Martial's last remark was a promise to give the letter to Maurice.

"It should be a bond of alliance, it seems to me," said Martial, gently.

"A bond of alliance!" rejoined Jean with a threatening gesture. "You are too fast, Monsieur le Marquis! Have you forgotten all the blood that flows between us? You didn't cut the ropes; but who condemned the Baron d'Escorval to death? Wasn't it your father, the Duc de Sairmeuse? An alliance! why, you must have forgotten that you and yours sent my

father to the scaffold! How have you rewarded the man whose honesty gave you back a fortune? By murdering him and ruining his daughter's reputation."

"I offered my name and fortune to your sister."

"I would have killed her with my own hand had she accepted your offer. Take that as a proof that I don't forget; and if any great disgrace ever tarnishes the proud name of Sairmeuse, think of Jean Lacheneur. My hand will be in it." He was so frantic with passion that he forgot his usual caution. However, after a great effort he recovered his self-possession, and added in calmer tones: "If you are so desirous of seeing Maurice, be at La Reche to-morrow at noon. He will be there." With these words he turned abruptly aside, sprang over the fence skirting the avenue, and vanished into the darkness.

"Jean," cried Martial, in almost supplicating tones; "Jean, come back—listen to me!" There was no reply. The young marquis stood bewildered in the middle of the road; and little short of a miracle prevented his being run over by a horseman galloping in the direction of Montaignac. The latter's shouts to get out of the way awakened him from his dream, and as the cold night breeze fanned his forehead he was able to collect his thoughts and judge his conduct. Ah, there was no denying it. He, the professed skeptic, a man who, despite his youth, boasted of his indifference and insensibility, had forgotten all self-control. He had acted generously, no doubt, but after all he had created a terrible scandal, all to no purpose. When Blanche, his wife, had accused Marie-Anne of being the cause of his frenzy, she had not been entirely wrong. For though Martial might regard all other opinions with disdain, the thought that Marie-Anne despised him, and considered him a traitor and a coward, had, in truth, made him perfectly frantic. It was for her sake that on the impulse of the moment he had resorted to such a startling justification. And if he had begged Jean to lead him to Maurice d'Escorval, it was because he hoped to find Marie-Anne not far off, and to say to her: "Appearances were against me, but I am innocent; and have proved it by unmasking the real culprit." It was to Marie-Anne that he wished Chanlouineau's circular to be given, thinking that she, at least, would be surprised at his generosity. And yet all his expectations had been disappointed. "It will be the devil to arrange!" he thought; "but nonsense! it will be forgotten in a month. The best way is to face those gossips at

once: I will return immediately." He said: "I will return," in the most deliberate manner; but his courage grew weaker at each successive step he took in the direction of the chateau. The guests must have already left, and Martial concluded that he would probably find himself alone with his young wife, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu, whose reproaches, tears, and threats he would be obliged to encounter. "No," muttered he. "After all, let them have a night to calm themselves. I will not appear until to-morrow."

But where should he sleep? He was in evening dress and bareheaded, and the night was chilly. On reflection he recollected his father's house at Montaignac. "I shall find a bed there," he thought, "servants, a fire, and a change of clothing —and to-morrow, a horse to come back again." The walk was a long one, no doubt; however, in his present mood, this circumstance did not displease him. The servant who came to open the door when he knocked was at first speechless with astonishment. "You, Monsieur le Marquis!" he exclaimed at last.

"Yes, it's I. Light a good fire in the drawing-room, and bring me a change of clothes." The valet obeyed, and soon Martial found himself alone, stretched on a sofa in front of the blazing logs. "It would be a good thing to sleep and forget my troubles," he thought; and accordingly he tried to do so, but it was almost dawn when at last he fell into a feverish slumber.

He woke up again at nine o'clock, gave the necessary instructions for breakfast, and was eating with a good appetite, when suddenly he remembered his rendezvous with Maurice. He ordered a horse and set out at once, reaching La Reche at half-past eleven o'clock. The others had not yet arrived; so he fastened his horse by the bridle to a tree near by, and leisurely climbed to the summit of the hill. It was here that Lacheneur's cottage had formerly stood, and the four walls still remained standing, blackened by fire. Martial was gazing at the ruins, not without a feeling of emotion, when he heard the branches crackle in the adjacent cover. He turned, and perceived that Maurice, Jean, and Corporal Bavois were approaching. The old soldier carried under his arm, in a piece of green serge, a couple of swords which Jean Lacheneur had borrowed from a retired officer at Montaignac during the night. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting," began Maurice, "but you will

observe that it is not yet noon. Since we scarcely expected to see you—"

"I was too anxious to justify myself not to be here early," interrupted Martial.

Maurice shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "This is not a question of self-justification, but one of fighting," he abruptly replied.

Insulting as were the words and the gesture that accompanied them, Martial never so much as winced. "Grief has made you unjust," said he, gently, "or M. Lacheneur has not told you everything."

"Yes, Jean has told me everything."

"Well, then?"

Martial's coolness drove Maurice frantic. "Well," he replied, with extreme violence, "my hatred is unabated even if my scorn is diminished. I have waited for this occasion ever since the day we met on the square at Sairmeuse in Mademoiselle Lacheneur's presence. You said to me then: 'We shall meet again.' And now here we stand face to face. What insults must I heap upon you to decide you to fight?"

With a threatening gesture Martial seized one of the swords which Bavois offered him, and assumed an attitude of defense. "You will have it so," said he in a husky voice. "The thought of Marie-Anne can no longer save you."

But the blades had scarcely crossed before a cry from Jean arrested the combat. "The soldiers!" he exclaimed; "we are betrayed." A dozen gendarmes were indeed approaching at full speed.

"Ah! I spoke the truth!" exclaimed Maurice. "The coward came, but the guards accompanied him." He bounded back, and breaking his sword over his knee, hurled the fragments in Martial's face. "Here, miserable wretch!" he cried.

"Wretch!" repeated Jean and Corporal Bavois, "traitor! coward!" And then they fled, leaving Martial literally thunderstruck.

He struggled hard to regain his composure. The soldiers were swiftly approaching; he ran to meet them, and addressing the officer in command, imperiously inquired: "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," replied the brigadier, respectfully, "you are the Duc de Sairmeuse's son."

"Very well! I forbid you to follow those men."

The brigadier hesitated at first; then in a decided tone he replied: "I can't obey you, sir. I have my orders." And turning to his men, he added, "Forward!"

He was about to set the example, when Martial seized him by the arm: "At least you will not refuse to tell me who sent you here?"

"Who sent us? The colonel, of course, in obedience to orders from the grand provost, M. d'Courtornieu. He sent the order last night. We have been hidden near here ever since daybreak. But thunder! let go your hold, I must be off."

He galloped away, and Martial, staggering like a drunken man, descended the slope, and remounted his horse. But instead of repairing to the Chateau of Sairmeuse, he returned to Montaignac, and passed the remainder of the afternoon in the solitude of his own room. That evening he sent two letters to Sairmeuse—one to his father, and the other to his wife.

XXVII

MARTIAL certainly imagined that he had created a terrible scandal on the evening of his marriage; but he had no conception of the reality. Had a thunderbolt burst in these gilded halls, the guests at Sairmeuse could not have been more amazed and horrified than they were by the scene presented to their view. The whole assembly shuddered when Martial, in his wrath, flung the crumpled letter full in the Marquis de Courtornieu's face. And when the latter sank back into an armchair, several young ladies of extreme sensibility actually fainted away. The young marquis had departed, taking Jean Lacheneur with him, and yet the guests stood as motionless as statues, pale, mute, and stupefied. It was Blanche who broke the spell. While the Marquis de Courtornieu was panting for breath—while the Duc de Sairmeuse stood trembling and speechless with suppressed anger—the young marquise made an heroic attempt to save the situation. With her hand still aching from Martial's brutal clasp, her heart swelling with rage and hatred, and her face whiter than her bridal veil, she yet had

sufficient strength to restrain her tears and force her lips to smile. "Really this is placing too much importance on a trifling misunderstanding which will be explained to-morrow," she said, almost gaily, to those nearest her. And stepping into the middle of the hall she made a sign to the musicians to play a country dance.

But scarcely had the first note sounded, than, as if by unanimous consent, the whole company hastened toward the door. It might have been supposed that the chateau was on fire, for the guests did not withdraw, they actually fled. An hour previously, the Marquis de Courtornieu and the Duc de Sairmeuse had been overwhelmed with the most obsequious homage and adulation. But now there was not one in all the assembly daring enough to take them openly by the hand. Just when they both believed themselves all-powerful they were rudely precipitated from their lordly eminence. Indeed disgrace, and perhaps punishment, were to be their portion. Heroic to the last, however, the abandoned bride endeavored to stay the tide of retreating guests. Standing near the door, and with her most bewitching smile upon her lips, Blanche spared neither flattering words nor entreaties in her efforts to retain the deserters. The attempt was vain; and, in point of fact, many were not sorry of this opportunity to repay the young Marquise de Sairmeuse for all her past disdain and criticism. Soon, of all the guests, there only remained one old gentleman who, on account of his gout, had deemed it prudent not to mingle with the crowd. He bowed as he passed before Blanche, and could not even restrain a blush, for he rightly considered that this swift flight was a cruel insult for the abandoned bride. Still, what could he do alone? Under the circumstances, his presence would prove irksome, and so he departed like the others.

Blanche was now alone, and there was no longer any necessity for constraint. There were no more curious witnesses to enjoy her sufferings and comment upon them. With a furious gesture she tore her bridal veil and wreath of orange flowers from her head, and trampled them under foot. "Extinguish the lights everywhere!" she cried to a servant passing by, stamping her foot angrily, and speaking as imperiously as if she had been in her father's house and not at Sairmeuse. The lackey obeyed her, and then, with flashing eyes and disheveled hair, she hastened to the little drawing-room at the end of the hall.

Several servants stood round the marquis, who was lying back in his chair with a swollen, purple face, as if he had been stricken with apoplexy.

"All the blood in his body has flown to his head," remarked the duke, with a shrug of his shoulders. His grace was furious. He scarcely knew whom he was most angry with—with Martial or the Marquis de Courtornieu. The former, by his public confession, had certainly imperiled, if not ruined, their political future. But, on the other hand, the Marquis de Courtornieu had cast on the Sairmeuses the odium of an act of treason revolting to any honorable heart. The duke was watching the clustering servants with a contracted brow when his daughter-in-law entered the room. She paused before him, and angrily exclaimed: "Why did you remain here while I was left alone to endure such humiliation. Ah! if I had been a man! All our guests have fled, monsieur—all of them!"

M. de Sairmeuse sprang up. "Ah, well! what if they have. Let them go to the devil!" Among all the invited ones who had just left his house, there was not one whom his grace really regretted—not one whom he regarded as an equal. In giving a marriage feast for his son, he had invited all the petty nobility and gentry of the neighborhood. They had come—very well! They had fled—*bon voyage!* If the duke cared at all for their desertion, it was only because it presaged with terrible eloquence the disgrace that was to come. Still he tried to deceive himself. "They will come back again, madame," said he; "you will see them return, humble and repentant! But where can Martial be?"

Blanche's eyes flashed but she made no reply.

"Did he go away with the son of that rascal, Lacheneur?"

"I believe so."

"It won't be long before he returns—"

"Who can say?"

M. de Sairmeuse struck the mantelpiece with his clenched fist. "My God!" he exclaimed, "this is an overwhelming misfortune." The young wife believed that he was anxious and angry on her account. But she was mistaken; for his grace was only thinking of his disappointed ambition. Whatever he might pretend, the duke secretly admitted his son's intellectual superiority and genius for intrigue, and he was now extremely anxious to consult him. "He has wrought this evil," he murmured: "it is for him to repair it! And he is capable

of doing so if he chooses." Then, aloud, he resumed: "Martial must be found—he must be found—"

With an angry gesture Blanche interrupted him. "You must look for Marie-Anne Lacheneur if you wish to find my husband," said she.

The duke was of the same opinion, but he dared not admit it. "Anger leads you astray, marquise," said he.

"I know what I say," was the curt response.

"No, believe me, Martial will soon make his appearance. If he went away, he will soon return. The servants shall go for him at once, or I will go for him myself—"

The duke left the room with a muttered oath, and Blanche approached her father, who still seemed to be unconscious. She seized his arm and shook it roughly, peremptorily exclaiming, "Father, father!" This voice, which had so often made the Marquis de Courtornieu tremble, proved more efficacious than eau de Cologne. "I wish to speak with you," added Blanche: "do you hear me?"

The marquis dared not disobey; he slowly opened his eyes and raised himself from his recumbent position. "Ah! how I suffer!" he groaned, "how I suffer!"

His daughter glanced at him scornfully, and then in a tone of bitter irony remarked: "Do you think that I'm in paradise?"

"Speak," sighed the marquis. "What do you wish to say?"

The bride turned haughtily to the servants and imperiously ordered them to leave the room. When they had done so and she had locked the door: "Let us speak of Martial," she began.

At the sound of his son-in-law's name the marquis bounded from his chair with clenched fists. "Ah, the wretch!" he exclaimed.

"Martial is my husband, father."

"And you! after what he has done—you dare to defend him?"

"I don't defend him; but I don't wish him to be murdered." At that moment the news of Martial's death would have given the Marquis de Courtornieu infinite satisfaction. "You heard, father," continued Blanche, "that young D'Escoval appointed a meeting for to-morrow, at midday, at La Reche. I know Martial; he has been insulted, and will go there. Will he encounter a loyal adversary? No. He will find a band of assassins. You alone can prevent him from being murdered."

"I—and how?"

"By sending some soldiers to La Reche, with orders to conceal themselves in the grove—with orders to arrest these murderers at the proper moment."

The marquis gravely shook his head. "If I do that," said he, "Martial is quite capable—"

"Of anything!—yes, I know it. But what does it matter to you, since I am willing to assume the responsibility?"

M. de Courtornieu looked at his daughter inquisitively, and if she had been less excited as she insisted on the necessity of sending instructions of Montaignac at once, she would have discerned a gleam of malice in his eye. The marquis was thinking that this would afford him an ample revenge, since he could easily bring dishonor on Martial, who had shown so little regard for the honor of others. "Very well, then; since you will have it so, it shall be done," he said, with feigned reluctance.

His daughter hastily procured ink and pens, and then with trembling hands he prepared a series of minute instructions for the commander at Montaignac. Blanche herself gave the letter to a servant, with directions to start at once; and it was not until she had seen him set off at a gallop that she went to her own apartment, that luxurious bridal chamber which Martial had so sumptuously adorned. But now its splendor only aggravated the misery of the deserted wife, for that she was deserted she did not for a moment doubt. She felt sure that her husband would not return, and had no faith whatever in the promises of the Duc de Sairmeuse, who at that moment was searching through the neighborhood with a party of servants. Where could the truant be? With Marie-Anne most assuredly—and at the thought a wild desire to wreak vengeance on her rival took possession of Blanche's heart. She did not sleep that night, she did not even undress, but when morning came she exchanged her snowy bridal robe for a black dress, and wandered through the grounds like a restless spirit. Most of the day, however, she spent shut up in her room, refusing to allow either the duke or her father to enter.

At about eight o'clock in the evening tidings came from Martial. A servant brought two letters; one sent by the young marquis to his father, and the other to his wife. For a moment Blanche hesitated to open the one addressed to her. It would determine her destiny, and she felt afraid. At last, however,

she broke the seal and read: "Madame—Between you and me all is ended; reconciliation is impossible. From this moment you are free. I esteem you enough to hope that you will respect the name of Sairmeuse, from which I can not relieve you. You will agree with me, I am sure, in thinking a quiet separation preferable to the scandal of legal proceedings. My lawyer will pay you an allowance befitting the wife of a man whose income amounts to five hundred thousand francs.—MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Blanche staggered beneath the terrible blow. She was indeed deserted—and deserted, as she supposed, for another. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "that creature! that creature! I will kill her!"

While Blanche was measuring the extent of her misfortune his grace the Duc de Sairmeuse raved and swore. After a fruitless search for his son he returned to the chateau, and began a continuous tramp to and fro in the great hall. On the morrow he scarcely ate, and was well-nigh sinking from weariness when his son's letter was handed him. It was very brief. Martial did not vouchsafe any explanation; he did not even mention the conjugal separation he had determined on, but merely wrote: "I can not return to Sairmeuse, and yet it is of the utmost importance that I should see you. You will, I trust, approve the resolution I have taken when I explain the reasons that have guided me in adopting it. Come to Montaignac, then, the sooner the better. I am waiting for you."

Had he listened to the prompting of his own impatience, his grace would have started at once. But he could not abandon the Marquis de Courtornieu and his son's wife in this abrupt fashion. He must at least see them, speak to them, and warn them of his intended departure. He attempted to do this in vain. Blanche had shut herself up in her own apartments, and remained deaf to all entreaties for admittance. Her father had been put to bed, and the physician who had been summoned to attend him, declared that the marquis was well-nigh at death's door. The duke was therefore obliged to resign himself to the prospect of another night of suspense, which was almost intolerable to such a nature as his. "However," thought he, "to-morrow, after breakfast, I will find some pretext to escape, without telling them I am going to see Martial."

He was spared this trouble, for on the following morning at about nine o'clock, while he was dressing, a servant came to inform him that M. de Courtornieu and his daughter were wait-

ing to speak with him in the drawing-room. Much surprised, he hastened downstairs. As he entered the room, the marquis, who was seated in an armchair, rose to his feet, leaning for support on Aunt Medea's shoulder; while Blanche, who was as pale as if every drop of blood had been drawn from her veins, stepped forward: "We are going, Monsieur le Duc," she said coldly, "and we wish to bid you farewell."

"What! you are going? Will you not—"

The young bride interrupted him with a mournful gesture, and drew Martial's letter from her bosom. "Will you do me the favor to peruse this?" she said, handing the missive to his grace.

The duke glanced over the short epistle, and his astonishment was so intense that he could not even find an oath. "Incomprehensible!" he faltered; "incomprehensible!"

"Incomprehensible, indeed," repeated the young wife sadly, but without bitterness. "I was married yesterday; to-day I am deserted. It would have been more generous to have reflected the evening before and not the next day. Tell Martial, however, that I forgive him for having destroyed my life, for having made me the most unhappy of women. I also forgive him for the supreme insult of speaking to me of his fortune. I trust he may be happy. Farewell, Monsieur le Duc, we shall never meet again. Farewell!"

With these words she took her father's arm, and they were about to retire when M. de Sairmeuse hastily threw himself between them and the door. "You shall not go away like this!" he exclaimed. "I will not suffer it. Wait at least until I have seen Martial. Perhaps he is not so guilty as you suppose—"

"Enough!" interrupted the marquis; "enough! This is one of those outrages which can never be repaired. May your conscience forgive you, as I myself forgive you. Farewell!"

This was said with such a conventional air of benevolence, and with such entire harmony of intonation and gesture, that M. de Sairmeuse was perfectly bewildered. With a dazed air he watched the marquis and his daughter depart, and they had been gone some moments before he recovered himself sufficiently to exclaim: "The old hypocrite! does he believe me to be his dupe?" His dupe! M. de Sairmeuse was so far from being his dupe that his next thought was: "What's going to follow this farce? If he says he forgives us, that means that he has some crushing blow in store for us." This idea soon

ripening into conviction made his grace feel apprehensive, for he did not quite see how he would cope successfully with the perfidious marquis. "But Martial is a match for him!" he at last exclaimed. "Yes, I must see Martial at once."

So great was his anxiety that he lent a helping hand in harnessing the horses he had ordered, and when the vehicle was ready he announced his determination to drive himself. As he urged the horses furiously onward, he tried to reflect, but the most contradictory ideas were seething in his brain, and he lost all power of looking at the situation calmly. He burst into Martial's room like a bombshell. "I certainly think you must have gone mad, marquis," he exclaimed. "That is the only valid excuse you can offer."

But Martial, who had been expecting the visit, had fully prepared himself for some such remark. "Never, on the contrary, have I felt more calm and composed in mind," he replied, "than I am now. Allow me to ask you one question. Was it you who sent the gendarmes to the meeting which Maurice d'Escorval appointed?"

"Marquis!"

"Very well! Then it was another act of infamy to be scored against the Marquis de Courtornieu."

The duke made no reply. In spite of all his faults and vices, this haughty nobleman retained those characteristics of the old French aristocracy—fidelity to his word and undoubted valor. He thought it perfectly natural, even necessary, that Martial should fight with Maurice; and he considered it a contemptible proceeding to send armed soldiers to seize an honest and confiding opponent.

"This is the second time," resumed Martial, "that this scoundrel has tried to dishonor our name; and if I am to convince people of the truth of this assertion, I must break off all connection with him and his daughter. I have done so, and I don't regret it, for I only married her out of deference to your wishes, and because it seemed necessary for me to marry, and because all women, excepting one, who can never be mine, are alike to me."

Such utterances were scarcely calculated to reassure the duke. "This sentiment is very noble, no doubt," said he; "but it has none the less ruined the political prospects of our house."

An almost imperceptible smile curved Martial's lips. "I believe, on the contrary, I have saved them," replied he. "It

is useless for us to attempt to deceive ourselves; this affair of the insurrection has been abominable, and you ought to bless the opportunity this quarrel gives you to free yourself from all responsibility in it. You must go to Paris at once, and see the Duc de Richelieu—nay, the king himself, and with a little address, you can throw all the odium on the Marquis de Courtornieu, and retain for yourself only the prestige of the valuable services you have rendered."

The duke's face brightened. "Zounds, marquis!" he exclaimed; "that is a good idea! In the future I shall be infinitely less afraid of Courtornieu."

Martial remained thoughtful. "It is not the Marquis de Courtornieu that I fear," he murmured, "but his daughter—my wife."

XXVIII

IN the country, news flies from mouth to mouth with inconceivable rapidity, and, strange as it may seem, the scene at the Chateau de Sairmeuse was known of at Father Poignot's farmhouse that same night. After Maurice, Jean Lacheneur, and Bavois left the farm, promising to recross the frontier as quickly as possible, the Abbe Midon decided not to acquaint M. d'Escorval either with his son's return, or Marie-Anne's presence in the house. The baron's condition was so critical that the merest trifle might turn the scale. At about ten o'clock he fell asleep, and the abbe and Madame d'Escorval then went downstairs to talk with Marie-Anne. They were sitting together when Poignot's eldest son came home in a state of great excitement. He had gone out after supper with some of his acquaintances to admire the splendors of the Sairmeuse fete, and he now came rushing back to relate the strange events of the evening to his father's guests. "It is inconceivable!" murmured the abbe when the lad had finished his narrative. The worthy ecclesiastic fully understood that these strange events would probably render their situation more perilous than ever. "I can not understand," added he, "how Maurice could commit

such an act of folly after what I had just said to him. The baron has no worse enemy than his own son."

In the course of the following day the inmates of the farmhouse heard of the meeting at La Reche; a peasant who had witnessed the preliminaries of the duel from a distance being able to give them the fullest details. He had seen the two adversaries take their places, and had then perceived the soldiers hasten to the spot. After a brief parley with the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, they had started off in pursuit of Maurice, Jean, and Bavois, fortunately, however, without overtaking them; for this peasant had met the same troopers again five hours later, when they were harassed and furious; the officer in command declaring that their failure was due to Martial, who had detained them. That same day, moreover, Father Poignot informed the abbe that the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were at variance. Their quarrel was the talk of the district. The marquis had returned home with his daughter, and the duke had gone to Montaignac. The abbe's anxiety on receiving this intelligence was so intense that, strive as he might, he could not conceal it from the Baron d'Escorval. "You have heard some bad news, my friend," said the latter.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Some new danger threatens us."

"None, none at all."

But the priest's protestations did not convince the wounded man. "Oh, don't deny it!" he exclaimed. "On the night before last, when you came into my room after I woke up, you were paler than death, and my wife had certainly been crying. What does all this mean?" As a rule, when the cure did not wish to reply to his patient's questions, it sufficed to tell him that conversation and excitement would retard his recovery; but this time the baron was not so docile. "It will be very easy for you to restore my peace of mind," he continued. "Confess now, you are afraid they may discover my retreat. This fear is torturing me also. Very well, swear to me that you will not let them take me alive, and then my mind will be at rest."

"I can't take such an oath as that," said the cure, turning pale.

"And why not?" insisted M. d'Escorval. "If I am recaptured, what will happen? They will nurse me, and then, as soon as I can stand on my feet, they will shoot me down again. Would it be a crime to save me from such suffering? You are my best friend; swear you will render me this supreme service.

Would you have me curse you for saving my life?" The abbe offered no verbal reply; but his eye, voluntarily or involuntarily, turned with a peculiar expression to the medicine chest standing upon the table near by.

Did he wish to be understood as saying: "I will do nothing myself, but you will find a poison there?"

At all events M. d'Escorval understood him so; and it was in a tone of gratitude that he murmured: "Thanks!" He breathed more freely now that he felt he was master of his life, and from that hour his condition, so long desperate, began steadily to improve.

Day after day passed by, and yet the abbe's gloomy apprehensions were not realized. Instead of fomenting reprisals, the scandal at the Chateau de Sairmeuse, and the imprudent temerity of which Maurice and Jean Lacheneur had been guilty, seemed actually to have frightened the authorities into increased indulgence; and it might have been reasonably supposed that they quite had forgotten, and wished every one else to forget, all about Lacheneur's conspiracy, and the slaughter which had followed it. The inmates of the farmhouse soon learned that Maurice and his friend the corporal had succeeded in reaching Piedmont; though nothing was heard of Jean Lacheneur, who had probably remained in France. However, his safety was scarcely to be feared for, as he was not upon the proscribed list. Later on it was rumored that the Marquis de Courtornieu was ill, and that Blanche, his daughter, did not leave his bedside; and then just afterward Father Poignot, returning from an excursion to Montaignac, reported that the Duc de Sairmeuse had lately passed a week in Paris, and that he was now on his way home with one more decoration—a convincing proof that he was still in the enjoyment of royal favor. What was of more importance was, that his grace succeeded in obtaining an order for the release of all the conspirators still detained in prison. It was impossible to doubt this news which the Montaignac papers formally chronicled on the following day. The abbe attributed this sudden and happy change of prospects to the quarrel between the duke and the Marquis de Courtornieu, and such indeed was the universal opinion in the neighborhood. Even the retired officers remarked: "The duke is decidedly better than he was supposed to be; if he was so severe, it is only because he was influenced by his colleague, the odious provost marshal."

Marie-Anne alone suspected the truth. A secret presentiment told her that it was Martial de Sairmeuse who was working all these changes, by utilizing his ascendency over his father's mind. "And it is for your sake," whispered an inward voice, "that Martial is working in this fashion. He cares nothing for the obscure peasant prisoners, whose names he does not even know! If he protects them, it is only that he may have a right to protect you, and those whom you love!" With these thoughts in her mind she could but feel her aversion for Martial diminish. Was not his conduct truly noble? She had to confess it was, and yet the thought of this ardent passion which she had inspired never once quickened the throbbing of Marie-Anne's heart. Alas! it seemed as if nothing were capable of touching her heart now. She was but the ghost of her former self. She would sit for whole days motionless in her chair, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, her lips contracted as if by a spasm, while great tears rolled silently down her cheeks. The Abbe Midon, who was very anxious on her account, often tried to question her. "You are suffering, my child," he said kindly one afternoon. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Cure. I am not ill."

"Won't you confide in me? Am I not your friend? What do you fear?"

She shook her head sadly and replied: "I have nothing to confide." She said this, and yet she was dying of sorrow and anguish. Faithful to the promise she had made to Maurice, she had never spoken of her condition, or of the marriage solemnized in the little church at Vigano. And she saw with inexpressible terror the moment when she could no longer keep her secret slowly approaching. Her agony was frightful, but what could she do? Fly! but where could she go? And by going, would she not lose all chance of hearing from Maurice, which was the only hope that sustained her in this trying hour? Still she had almost determined on flight when circumstances —providentially, it seemed to her—came to her aid.

Money was needed at the farm. The fugitives were unable to obtain any without betraying their whereabouts, and Father Poignot's little store was almost exhausted. The Abbe Midon was wondering what they could do, when Marie-Anne told him of the will which Chanlouineau had made in her favor, and of the money concealed under the hearthstone in the room on the first floor. "I might go to the Borderie one night," she suggested,

"enter the house, which is unoccupied, obtain the money and bring it here. I have a right to do so, haven't I?"

"You might be seen," replied the priest, "and—who knows?—perhaps arrested. If you were questioned, what plausible explanation could you give?"

"What shall I do, then?"

"Act openly; you yourself are not compromised. You must appear at Sairmeuse to-morrow as if you had just returned from Piedmont; go at once to the notary, take possession of your property, and instal yourself at the Borderie."

Marie-Anne shuddered. "What, live in Chanlouineau's house?" she faltered. "Live there alone?"

"Heaven will protect you, my dear child. I can only see an advantage in your living at the Borderie. It will be easy to communicate with you; and with ordinary precautions there can be no danger. Before you start we will decide on a meeting place, and two or three times a week you can join Father Poignot there. And in the course of two or three months you can be still more useful to us. When people have grown accustomed to your living at the Borderie, we will take the baron there. Such an arrangement would hasten his convalescence; for in the narrow loft, where we are obliged to conceal him now, he is really suffering for want of light and air."

Accordingly it was decided that Father Poignot should accompany Marie-Anne to the frontier that very night; and that she should take the diligence running between Piedmont and Montaignac, *via* Sairmeuse. Before she started, the Abbe Midon gave her minute instructions as to the story she should tell of her sojourn in foreign lands. The peasantry, possibly even the authorities, would question her, and all her answers must tend to prove that the Baron d'Escorval was concealed near Turin.

The plan was carried out as projected; and at eight o'clock on the following morning, the people of Sairmeuse were greatly astonished to see Marie-Anne alight from the passing diligence. "M. Lacheneur's daughter has come back again!" they exclaimed. The words flew from lip to lip with marvelous rapidity, and soon all the villagers stood at their doors and windows watching the poor girl as she paid the driver, and entered the local hostelry, followed by a lad carrying a small trunk. Urban curiosity has some sense of shame, and seeks to hide itself when prying into other people's affairs, but country folks are openly and outrageously inquisitive. Thus when Marie-Anne

emerged from the inn, she found quite a crowd of sightseers awaiting her with gaping mouths and staring eyes. And fully a score of chattering gossips thought fit to escort her to the notary's door. This notary was a man of importance, and he welcomed Marie-Anne with all the deference due to the heiress of a house and farm worth from forty to fifty thousand francs. However, being jealous of his renown for perspicuity, he gave her clearly to understand that, as a man of experience, he fully divined that love alone had influenced Chanlouineau in drawing up this last will and testament. He was no doubt anxious to obtain some information concerning the young farmer's passion, and Marie-Anne's composure and reticence disappointed him immensely.

"You forget what brings me here," she said; "you don't tell me what I have to do!"

The notary, thus interrupted, made no further attempts at divination. "Plague on it!" he thought, "she is in a hurry to get possession of her property—the avaricious creature!" Then he added aloud: "The business can be finished at once, for the magistrate is at liberty to-day, and can go with us to break the seals this afternoon."

So, before evening, all the legal requirements were complied with, and Marie-Anne was formally installed at the Borderie. She was alone in Chanlouineau's house, and as the darkness gathered round her, a great terror seized hold of her heart. She fancied that the doors were about to open, that this man who had loved her so much would suddenly appear before her, and that she should hear his voice again as she heard it for the last time in his grim prison cell. She struggled hard against these foolish fears, and at last, lighting a lamp, she ventured to wander through his house—now hers—but wherein everything spoke so forcibly of its former owner. She slowly examined the different rooms on the ground floor, noting the recent repairs and improvements, and at last climbed the stairs to the room above which Chanlouineau had designed to be the altar of his love. Strange as it may seem, it was really luxuriously upholstered—far more so than Chanlouineau's letter had led her to suppose. The young farmer, who for years had breakfasted off a crust and an onion, had lavished a small fortune on this apartment, which he meant to be his idol's sanctuary.

"How he loved me!" murmured Marie-Anne, moved by that

emotion, the bare thought of which had awakened Maurice's jealousy. But she had neither the time nor the right to yield to her feelings. At that very moment Father Poignot was no doubt waiting for her at the appointed meeting-place. Accordingly, she swiftly raised the hearthstone, and found the money which Chanlouineau had mentioned. She handed the larger part of it to Poignot, who in his turn gave it to the abbe on reaching home.

The days that followed were peaceful ones for Marie-Anne, and this tranquillity, after so many trials, seemed to her almost happiness. Faithful to the priest's instructions, she lived alone; but, by frequent visits to Sairmeuse, she accustomed people to her presence. Yes, she would have been almost happy if she could only have had some news of Maurice. What had become of him? Why did he give no sign of life? She would have given anything in exchange for one word of love and counsel from him. Soon the time approached when she would require a confidant; and yet there was no one in whom she dared confide. In her dire need she at last remembered the old physician at Vigano, who had been one of the witnesses at her marriage. She had no time to reflect whether he would be willing or not; but wrote to him immediately, entrusting her letter to a youth in the neighborhood. "The gentleman says you may rely upon him," said the lad on his return. And that very evening Marie-Anne was roused by a rap at her door. It was the kind-hearted old man, who had hastened to her relief. He remained at the Borderie nearly a fortnight, and when he left one morning before daybreak, he took away with him under his cloak an infant—a little boy—whom he had sworn to cherish as his own child.

XXIX

IT had cost Blanche an almost superhuman effort to leave Sairmeuse without treating the duke to a display of violence, such as would have fairly astonished even that irascible nobleman. She was tortured with inward rage at the very moment,

when, with an assumption of melancholy dignity, she murmured the words of forgiveness we have previously recorded. But vanity, after all, was more powerful than resentment. She thought of the gladiators who fall in the arena with a smile on their lips, and resolved that no one should see her weep, that no one should hear her threaten or complain. Indeed, on her return to the Chateau de Courtornieu her behavior was truly worthy of a stoic philosopher. Her face was pale, but not a muscle of her features moved as the servants glanced at her inquisitively. "I am to be called mademoiselle as formerly," she said imperiously. "Any of you forgetting this order will be at once dismissed."

One maid did forget the injunction that very day, addressing her young mistress as "madame," and the poor girl was instantly dismissed, in spite of her tears and protestations. All the servants were indignant. "Does she hope to make us forget that she's married, and that her husband has deserted her?" they queried.

Ah! that was what she wished to forget herself. She wished to annihilate all recollection of the day that had seen her successively maiden, wife, and widow. For was she not really a widow? A widow, not by her husband's death, it is true; but, thanks to the machinations of an odious rival, an infamous, perfidious creature, lost to all sense of shame. And yet, though she had been disdained, abandoned, and repulsed, she was no longer free. She belonged to this man whose name she bore like a badge of servitude—to this man who hated her, who had fled from her. She was not yet twenty; still her youth, her hopes, her dreams were ended. Society condemned her to seclusion, while Martial was free to rove wheresoever he listed. It was now that she realized the disadvantages of isolation. She had not been without friends in her schoolgirl days; but after leaving the convent she had estranged them by her haughtiness, on finding them not as high in rank or as wealthy as herself. So she was now reduced to the irritating consolations of Aunt Medea, a very worthy person, no doubt, but whose tears flowed as freely for the loss of a cat as for the death of a relative. However, Blanche firmly persevered in her determination to conceal her grief and despair in the deepest recesses of her heart. She drove about the country, wore her prettiest dresses, and forced herself to assume a gay and indifferent air. But on going to church at Sairmeuse on the

following Sunday she realized the futility of her efforts. Her fellow worshipers did not look at her haughtily, or even inquisitively, but they turned aside to smile, and she overheard remarks concerning "the maiden widow" which pierced her very soul. So she was an object of mockery and ridicule. "Oh! I will have my revenge!" she muttered to herself.

She had indeed already thought of vengeance; and had found her father quite willing to assist her. For the first time the father and the daughter shared the same views. "The Duc de Sairmeuse shall learn what it costs to favor a prisoner's escape and to insult a man like me," said the Marquis bitterly. "Fortune, favor, position—he shall lose everything, and I will not rest content till I see him ruined and dishonored at my feet. And, mind me, that day shall surely come!"

Unfortunately, however, for M. de Courtornieu's project, he was extremely ill for three days after the scene at Sairmeuse; and then he wasted three days more in composing a report, which was intended to crush his former ally. This delay ruined him, for it gave Martial time to perfect his plans, and to despatch the Duc de Sairmeuse to Paris with full instructions. And what did the duke say to the king, who gave him such a gracious reception? He undoubtedly pronounced the first reports to be false, reduced the rising at Montaignac to its proper proportions, represented Lacheneur as a fool, and his followers as inoffensive idiots. It was said, moreover, that he led his majesty to suppose that the Marquis de Courtornieu might have provoked the outbreak by undue severity. He had served under Napoleon, and had possibly thought it necessary to make a display of his zeal, so that his past apostasy might be forgotten. As far as the duke himself was concerned, he deeply deplored the mistakes into which he had been led by his ambitious colleague, on whom he cast most of the responsibility of so much bloodshed. To be brief, the result of the duke's journey was, that when the Marquis de Courtornieu's report reached Paris, it was answered by a decree depriving him of his office as provost-marshal of the province.

This unexpected blow quite crushed the old intriguer. What! he had been duped in this fashion, he so shrewd, so adroit, so subtle-minded and quick-witted; he who had successfully battled with so many storms; who, unlike most of his fellow patricians, had been enriched, not impoverished, by the Revolution, and who had served with the same obsequious countenance each

master who was willing to accept his services. "It must be that old imbecile, the Duc de Sairmeuse, who has maneuvred so skilfully," he groaned. "But who advised him? I can't imagine who it could have been."

Who it was Blanche knew only too well. Like Marie-Anne, she recognized Martial's hand in all this business. "Ah! I was not deceived in him," she thought; "he *is* the great diplomatist I believed him to be. To think that at his age he has outwitted my father, an old politician of such experience and acknowledged skill! And he does all this to please Marie-Anne," she continued, frantic with rage. "It is the first step toward obtaining pardon for that vile creature's friends. She has unbounded influence over him, and so long as she lives there is no hope for me. But patience, my time will come."

She had not yet decided what form the revenge she contemplated should take; but she already had her eye on a man who she believed would be willing to do anything for money. And, strange as it may seem, this man was none other than our old acquaintance, Father Chupin. Burdened with remorse, despised and jeered at, stoned whenever he ventured in the streets, and horror-stricken whenever he thought of Balstain's vow, Chupin had left Montaignac and sought an asylum at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. In his ignorance he fancied that the great nobleman who had incited him to discover Lacheneur owed him, over and above the promised reward, all needful aid and protection. But the duke's servants shunned the so-called traitor. He was not even allowed a seat at the kitchen table, nor a straw pallet in the stables. The cook threw him a bone, as he would have thrown it to a dog; and he slept just where he could. However, he bore all these hardships uncomplainingly, deeming himself fortunate in being able to purchase comparative safety even at such a price. But when the duke returned from Paris with a policy of forgetfulness and conciliation in his pocket, his grace could no longer tolerate in his establishment the presence of a man who was the object of universal execration. He accordingly gave instructions for Chupin to be dismissed. The latter resisted, however, swearing that he would not leave Sairmeuse unless he were forcibly expelled or unless he received the order from the lips of the duke himself. This obstinate resistance was reported to the duke, and made him hesitate; but a word from Martial concerning the necessities of the situation eventually decided him.

He sent for Chupin and told him that he must not visit Sairmeuse again under any pretext whatever, softening the harshness of expulsion, however, by the offer of a small sum of money. But Chupin, sullenly refusing the proffered coins, gathered his belongings together and departed, shaking his clenched fist at the chateau, and vowing vengeance on the Sairmeuse family. He then went to his old home, where his wife and his two boys still lived. He seldom left this filthy den, and then only to satisfy his poaching proclivities. On these occasions, instead of stealthily firing at a squirrel or a partridge from some safe post of concealment, as he had done in former times, he walked boldly into the Sairmeuse or the Courtornieu forests, shot his game, and brought it home openly, displaying it in an almost defiant manner. He spent the rest of his time in a state of semi-intoxication, for he drank constantly, and more and more immoderately. When he had taken more than usual, his wife and his sons usually attempted to obtain money from him, and if persuasion failed they often resorted to blows. For he had never so much as shown them the blood-money paid to him for betraying Lacheneur; and though he had squandered a small sum at Montaignac, no one knew what he had done with the great bulk of the twenty thousand francs in gold paid to him by the Duc de Sairmeuse. His sons believed he had buried it somewhere; but they tried in vain to wrest his secret from him. All the people in the neighborhood were aware of this state of affairs, and one day when the head gardener at Courtornieu was telling the story to two of his assistants, Blanche, seated on a bench near by, chanced to overhear him.

"Ah, he's an old scoundrel!" said the gardener indignantly. "And he ought to be at the galleys, instead of at large among respectable people."

At the same moment the voice of hatred was whispering to Blanche: "That's the man to serve your purpose." But how an opportunity was to be found to confer with him? she wondered, being too prudent to think of hazarding a visit to his house. However, she remembered that he occasionally went shooting in the Courtornieu woods, and that it might be possible for her to meet him there. "It will only require," thought she, "a little perseverance and a few long walks." But, in point of fact, it cost poor Aunt Medea, the inevitable chaperon, two long weeks of almost constant perambulation. "Another

freak!" groaned the impoverished relative, overcome with fatigue; "my niece is certainly crazy!"

However, at last, one lovely afternoon in May, Blanche came across the object of her quest. She chanced to be standing in a sequestered nook nigh the mere, situated in the depths of the forest of Courtornieu, when she perceived Chupin, tramping sullenly along with his gun in his hand and glancing suspiciously on either side. Not that he feared either gamekeeper or judicial proceedings, but go wherever he would, still and ever he fancied he could see Balstain, the Piedmontese innkeeper, walking in his shadow and brandishing the terrible knife which, by Saint-Jean-de-Coche, he had consecrated to his vengeance. Seeing Blanche in turn, the old rascal would have fled into the cover, but before he could do so she had called to him: "Eh, Father Chupin!"

He hesitated for a moment, then paused, dropped his gun, and waited.

Aunt Medea was pale with fright. "Blessed Jesus!" she murmured, pressing her niece's arm; "what are you calling that terrible man for?"

"I want to speak to him."

"What, Blanche, do you dare—"

"I must!"

"No, I can't allow it. I must not—"

"There, that's enough!" said Blanche with one of those imperious glances that deprive a dependent of all strength and courage; "quite enough." Then, in gentler tones: "I *must* talk with this man," she added. "And you, Aunt Medea, must remain some little distance off. Keep a close watch on every side, and if you see any one approaching, call me at once."

Aunt Medea, submissive as was her wont, immediately obeyed; and Blanche walked straight toward the old poacher. "Well, my good Father Chupin, and what sort of sport have you had to-day?" she began directly she was a few steps from him."

"What do you want with me?" growled Chupin; "for you do want something, or you wouldn't trouble yourself about a man like me."

The old ruffian's manner was so surly and aggressive that Blanche needed all her strength of mind to carry out her purpose. "Yes, it is true that I have a favor to ask you," she replied in a resolute tone.

"Ah, ha! I supposed so."

"A mere trifle, which will cost you no trouble, and for which you shall be well paid." She said this so carelessly that an ordinary person would have supposed she was really asking for some unimportant service; but cleverly as she played her part, Chupin was not deceived.

"No one asks trifling services of a man like me," he said coarsely. "Since I served the good cause, at the peril of my life, people seem to suppose they've a right to come to me with money in their hands whenever they want any dirty work done. It's true that I was well paid for that other job; but I would like to melt all the gold and pour it down the throats of those who gave it to me. Ah! I know now what it costs the poor to listen to the words of the great! Go your way, and if you have any wickedness in your head, do it yourself!"

He shouldered his gun and was moving off when Blanche coldly observed: "It was because I knew of your wrongs that I stopped you; I thought you would be glad to serve me, because I hate the Sairmeuses as you do."

These words excited the old poacher's interest, and he paused. "I know very well that you hate the Sairmeuses now—but—"

"But what?"

"Why, in less than a month you will be reconciled. And then that old wretch, Chupin—"

"We shall never be reconciled."

"Hum!" growled the wily rascal after deliberating a while. "And if I do assist you, what compensation will you give me?"

"I will give you whatever you wish for—money, land, a house—"

"Many thanks. I want something quite different."

"What do you want then? Tell me."

Chupin reflected for a moment, and then replied: "This is what I want. I have a good many enemies, and I don't even feel safe in my own house. My sons abuse me when I've been drinking, and my wife is quite capable of poisoning my wine. I tremble for my life and for my money. I can't endure such an existence much longer. Promise me an asylum at the Chateau de Courtornieu and I'm yours. I shall be safe in your house. But let it be understood I won't be ill-treated by the servants as I was at Sairmeuse."

"Oh, I can promise you all that."

"Swear it then by your hope of heaven."

"I swear it."

There was such evident sincerity in her accent that Chupin felt reassured. He leaned toward her, and in a low voice remarked: "Now tell me your business." His small gray eyes glittered in a threatening fashion; his thin lips were drawn tightly over his sharp teeth; he evidently expected some proposition of murder, and was ready to accomplish it.

His attitude evinced his feelings so plainly that Blanche shuddered. "Really, what I want of you is almost nothing," she replied. "I only want you to watch the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"Your husband."

"Yes; my husband. I want to know what he does, where he goes, and what persons he sees; I want to know how he spends all his time."

"What! now is that really all you want me to do?" asked Chupin eagerly.

"For the present, yes. My plans are not yet decided; but circumstances will guide me."

"You can rely upon me," replied Chupin at once; "but I must have a little time."

"Yes, I understand that. To-day is Saturday; can you give me a first report on Thursday?"

"In five days? Yes, probably."

"In that case, meet me here on Thursday, at the same hour."

The conversation might have continued a few moments longer, but at this very moment Aunt Medea was heard exclaiming: "Some one is coming!"

"Quick! we must not be seen together. Conceal yourself," ejaculated Blanche, and while the old poacher disappeared with one bound into the forest, she hastily rejoined her chaperone. A few paces off she could perceive one of her father's servants approaching.

"Ah! mademoiselle," exclaimed the lackey, "we have been looking for you everywhere during the last three hours. Your father, M. le Marquis—good heavens! what a misfortune! A physician has been sent for."

"Whatever has happened? Is my father dead?"

"No, mademoiselle, no; but—how can I tell you? When the marquis went out this morning his actions were very strange, and—and—when he returned—" As he spoke, the servant tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "You understand me,

mademoiselle—when he came home his reason seemed to—to have left him!"

Without waiting for the servant to finish, or for her terrified aunt to follow her, Blanche darted off in the direction of the chateau. "How is the marquis?" she inquired of the first servant she met.

"He is in bed, and is quieter than he was," answered the maid.

But Blanche had already reached her father's room. He was sitting up in bed, under the supervision of his valet and a footman. His face was livid, and a white foam had gathered on his lips. Still, he recognized his daughter. "Here you are," said he. "I was waiting for you."

She paused on the threshold, and though she was neither tender-hearted nor impressionable, the sight seemed to appal her: "My father!" she faltered. "Good heavens! what has happened?"

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed the marquis, with a discordant laugh. "I met him! what, you doubt me? I tell you that I saw the wretch. I know him well; haven't I seen his cursed face before my eyes for more than a month?—for it never leaves me. I saw him. It was in the forest near the Sanguille rocks. You know the place; it is always dark there, on account of the trees. I was slowly walking home thinking of him, when suddenly he sprang up before me, holding out his arms as if to bar my passage. 'Come,' said he, 'you must join me.' He was armed with a gun; he fired—"

The marquis paused, and Blanche summoned up sufficient courage to approach him. For more than a minute she looked at him attentively, with a cold, magnetic glance, such as often exercises great influence over those who have lost their reason, then shaking him roughly by the arm, she exclaimed: "Control yourself, father. You are the victim of an hallucination. It is impossible that you can have seen the man you speak of."

Blanche knew only too well who was the man that M. de Courtornieu alluded to; but she dared not, could not, utter his name.

However, the marquis had resumed his scarcely coherent narrative. "Was I dreaming?" he continued. "No, it was Lacheneur, Lacheneur and none other who stood in front of me. I am sure of it, and the proof is that he reminded me of a circumstance which occurred in my youth, and which was known

only to him and me. It happened during the Reign of Terror. He was all-powerful in Montaignac; and I was accused of being in correspondence with the *emigres*. My property had been confiscated; and I was every moment expecting to feel the executioner's hand on my shoulder, when Lacheneur took me to his house. He concealed me; furnished me with a passport; saved my money, and saved my life as well; and yet—and yet I sentenced him to death. That's the reason why I've seen him again. I must join him; he told me so—I'm a dying man!" With these words the marquis fell back on his pillows, pulled the bedclothes over his face, and lay there so rigid and motionless that one might readily have supposed the counterpane covered some inanimate corpse.

Mute with horror, the servants exchanged frightened glances. Such baseness and ingratitude amazed them. They could not understand why, under such circumstances, the marquis had not pardoned Lacheneur. Blanche alone retained her presence of mind. Turning to her father's valet, she said: "Hasn't some one tried to injure my father?"

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, some one most certainly has: a little more and Monsieur le Marquis would have been killed."

"How do you know that?"

"In undressing the marquis I noticed that he had received a wound in the head. I also examined his hat, and I found three holes in it, which could only have been made by bullets."

"Then some one must have tried to murder my father," murmured Blanche, "and this attack of delirium has been brought on by fright. How can we find out who the would-be murderer was?"

The valet shook his head. "I suspect that old poacher, who is always prowling about here, a man named—Chupin."

"No, it couldn't have been he."

"Ah! I am almost sure of it. There's no one else in the neighborhood capable of such an evil deed."

Blanche could not give her reasons for declaring Chupin innocent. Nothing in the world would have induced her to admit that she had met him, talked with him for more than half an hour, and only just parted from him. So she remained silent.

Soon afterward the medical man arrived. He removed the coverlet from M. de Courtornieu's face, being almost com-

pelled to use force in doing so—examined the patient with evident anxiety, and then ordered mustard plasters, applications of ice to the head, leeches, and a potion, for which a servant was to gallop to Montaignac at once. Immediately afterward all was bustle and confusion in the house. When the physician left the sick-room, Blanche followed him. "Well, doctor?" she said, with a questioning look.

The physician hesitated, but at last he replied: "People sometimes recover from such attacks."

It really mattered little to Blanche whether her father recovered or died, but she felt that an opportunity to recover her lost influence was now afforded her. If she was to fight successfully against Martial's desertion, she must improvise a very different reputation to that which she at present enjoyed. Now, if she could only appear to the world in the character of a patient victim, and devoted daughter, public opinion, which, as she had recently discovered, was after all worth having, might yet turn in her favor. Such an occasion offering itself must not be neglected. Accordingly, she lavished the most touching and delicate attentions on her suffering father. It was impossible to induce her to leave his bedside for a moment, and it was only with great difficulty that she would be persuaded to sleep for a couple of hours in an armchair in the sick-room. But while she was playing this self-imposed rôle of sister of charity with a talent worthy of a healthier mind, her chief thoughts were for Chupin. What was he doing at Montaignac? Was he watching Martial as he had promised? How slowly the time passed! Would that Thursday which had been appointed for their meeting never come?

It came at last, and momentarily entrusting her father to Aunt Medea's care, Blanche made her escape. The old poacher was waiting for her at the appointed place near the lake. "Well, what have you got to tell me?" asked Blanche.

"Next to nothing, I'm sorry to say."

"What! haven't you been watching the marquis?"

"Your husband? Excuse me, I have followed him like his own shadow. But I'm afraid the news I have of him won't interest you very much. Since the duke left for Paris, your husband has charge of everything. Ah! you wouldn't recognize him! He's always busy now. He's up at cock-crow; and goes to bed with the chickens. He writes letters all the morning. In the afternoon he receives every one who calls upon

him. The retired officers are hand and glove with him. He has reinstated five or six of them, and has granted pensions to two others. He seldom goes out, and never in the evening."

He paused, and for a moment Blanche remained silent. A question rose to her lips, and yet she scarcely dared to propound it. She blushed with shame, and it was only after a supreme effort she managed to articulate: "But he must surely have a mistress?"

Chupin burst into a noisy laugh. "Well, we have come to it at last," he said, with an air of audacious familiarity that made Blanche positively shudder. "You mean that scoundrel Lacheneur's daughter, don't you? that stuck-up minx Marie-Anne?"

Blanche felt that denial was useless. "Yes," she answered; "I do mean Marie-Anne."

"Ah, well! she's neither been seen nor heard of. She must have fled with her other lover, Maurice d'Escorval."

"You are mistaken."

"Oh, not at all! Of all the Lacheneurs, the only one remaining about here is Jean, the son, who leads a vagabond life, poaching much as I do. He's always in the woods, day and night, with his gun slung over his shoulder. I caught sight of him once. He's quite frightful to look at, a perfect skeleton, with eyes that glitter like live coals. If he ever meets me and sees me, my account will be settled then and there."

Blanche turned pale. Plainly enough it was Jean Lacheneur who had fired at her father. However, concealing her agitation, she replied: "I myself feel sure that Marie-Anne is in the neighborhood, concealed at Montaignac, probably. I must know. Try and find out where she is by Monday, when I will meet you here again."

"All right, I'll try," answered Chupin, and he did indeed try; exerting all his energy and cunning, but in vain. He was fettered by the precautions which he took to shield himself against Balstain and Jean Lacheneur; while, on the other hand, he had to prosecute his search personally, as no one in the neighborhood would have consented to give him the least information. "Still no news!" he said to Blanche at each succeeding interview. But she would not admit the possibility of Marie-Anne having fled with Maurice. Jealousy will not yield even to evidence. She had declared that Marie-Anne had taken her husband from her, that Martial and Marie-Anne

loved each other, and it must be so, all proofs to the contrary notwithstanding. At last, one morning, she found her spy jubilant. "Good news!" he cried, as soon as he perceived her; "we have caught the minx at last."

XXX

THIS was three days after Marie-Anne's arrival at the Borderie, which event was the general topic of conversation throughout the neighborhood, Chanlouineau's will especially forming the subject of countless comments. The old folks looked grave, and repeated to one another: "Ah, well, here's M. Lacheneur's daughter with an income of more than two thousand francs, without counting the house." While the unattractive maidens who had not been fortunate enough to secure husbands muttered in their turn: "An honest girl would have had no such luck as that!"

When Chupin brought this great news to Blanche she trembled with anger, and clenched her soft white hands, exclaiming: "What audacity! What impudence!"

The old poacher seemed to be of the same opinion. "If each of her lovers gives her as much she will be richer than a queen," quothed he maliciously. "She will be able to buy up Sairmeuse, and Courtornieu as well if she chooses."

"And this is the woman who has estranged Martial from me!" ejaculated Blanche. "He abandons me for a filthy drab like that!" She was so incensed that she entirely forgot Chupin's presence, making no attempt to restrain herself, or to hide the secret of her sufferings. "Are you sure that what you tell me is true?" she asked.

"As sure as you stand there."

"Who told you all this?"

"No one—I have eyes. That is, I overheard two villagers talking about Mademoiselle Lacheneur's return; so then I went to the Borderie to see for myself, and I found all the shutters open. Marie-Anne was leaning out of a window. She doesn't even wear mourning, the heartless hussy!" Chupin spoke the

truth, but then the only dress the poor girl possessed was the one that Madame d'Escorval had lent her on the night of the insurrection, when it became necessary for her to doff her masculine attire.

The old poacher was about to increase Blanche's irritation by some further malicious remarks, when she checked him with the inquiry: "Whereabouts is the Borderie?"

"Oh, about a league and a half from here, opposite the water mills on the Oiselle, and not far from the river bank."

"Ah, yes! I remember now. Were you ever in the house?"

"Oh, scores and scores of times while Chanlouineau was living."

"Then you can describe it to me?"

"I should think I could. It stands in an open space a little distance from the road. There's a small garden in front and an orchard behind. They are both hedged in. In the rear of the orchard, on the right, are the vineyards; while on the left there's a small grove planted round about a spring." Chupin paused suddenly in his description, and, with a knowing wink, inquired: "But what use do you mean to make of all this information?"

"That's no matter of yours. But tell me, what is the house like inside?"

"There are three large square rooms on the ground floor, besides the kitchen and pantry. I can't say what there is upstairs, as I've never been there."

"And what are the rooms you've seen furnished like?"

"Why, like those in any peasant's house, to be sure." Chupin, it should be observed, knew nothing of the luxurious apartment which Chanlouineau had intended for Marie-Anne. Indeed, the only stranger who was aware of its existence was the leading upholsterer of Montaignac, for the young farmer had never confided his secret to any one in the neighborhood, and the furniture had been brought to the Borderie one night in the stealthiest fashion.

"How many doors are there to the house?" inquired Blanche.

"Three: one opening into the garden, one into the orchard, and another communicating with the stables. The staircase is in the middle room."

"And is Marie-Anne quite alone at the Borderie?"

"Quite alone at present; but I expect her brigand of a brother will join her before long."

After this reply, Blanche fell into so deep and prolonged a reverie that Chupin at last became impatient. He ventured to touch her on the arm, and, in a wily voice, inquired: "Well, what shall we decide?"

Blanche drew back shuddering. "My mind is not yet made up," she stammered. "I must reflect—I will see." And then noting the old poacher's discontented face, she added: "I will do nothing lightly. Don't lose sight of the marquis. If he goes to the Borderie, and he will go there, I must be informed of it. If he writes, and he will write, try to procure one of his letters. I must see you every other day. Don't rest! Try to deserve the good place I am reserving for you at Courtornieu. Now go!"

The old rascal trudged off without attempting a rejoinder, but his manner plainly showed that he was intensely disappointed. "It serves me deucedly well right," he growled. "I oughtn't to have listened to such a silly, affected woman. She fills the air with her ravings, wants to kill everybody, burn and destroy everything. She only asks for an opportunity. Well, the occasion presents itself, and then of course her heart fails her. She draws back, and gets afraid!"

In these remarks Chupin did Blanche great injustice. If, as he had noted, she had shrunk back shuddering when he urged her to decide, it was not because her will wavered, but rather because her flesh instinctively revolted against the deed she had in her mind. The old spy's unwelcome touch, his perfidious voice and threatening glance, may also in a minor degree have prompted this movement of repulsion. At all events, Blanche's reflections were by no means calculated to appease her rancor. Whatever Chupin and the Sairmeuse villagers might say to the contrary, she regarded the story which Marie-Anne, in obedience to the Abbe Midon's instructions, had told of her travels in Piedmont as a ridiculous fable, and nothing more. In her opinion, Marie-Anne had simply emerged from some retreat where Martial had previously deemed it prudent to conceal her. But why this sudden reappearance? Vindictive Blanche was ready to swear that it was out of mere bravado, and intended only as an insult to herself. "Ah, I *will* have my revenge," she thought. "I would tear my heart out if it were capable of cowardly weakness under such provocation!"

The voice of conscience was unheard, unheeded, in this tumult of passion. Her sufferings, and Jean Lacheneur's at-

tempt upon her father's life, seemed to justify the most terrible reprisals. She had plenty of time now to brood over her wrongs, and to concoct schemes of vengeance; for her father no longer required her care. He had passed from the frenzied ravings of delirium to the stupor of idiocy. And yet the physician had confidently declared his patient to be cured. Cured! The body was cured, perhaps, but reason had utterly fled. All traces of intelligence had left the marquis's once mobile face, so ready in former times to assume the precise expression which his hypocrisy and duplicity required. His eyes, which had gleamed with cunning, wore a dull, vacant stare, and his under lip hung low, as is customary with idiots. Worst of all, no hope of any improvement was to be entertained. A single passion—indulgence at table—had taken the place of all those which in former times had swayed the life of this ambitious man. The marquis, in previous years most temperate in his habits, now ate and drank with disgusting voracity, and was rapidly becoming extremely corpulent. Between his meals he would wander about the chateau and its surroundings in a listless fashion, scarcely knowing what he did. His memory had gone, and he had lost all sense of dignity, all knowledge of good and evil. Even the instinct of self-preservation, the last which dies within us, had departed, and he had to be watched like a child. Often, as he roamed about the grounds, his daughter would gaze at him from her window with a strange terror in her heart. But after all, this warning of providence only increased her desire for revenge. "Who would not prefer death to such a misfortune?" she murmured. "Ah! Jean Lacheneur's revenge is far more terrible than if his bullet had pierced my father's heart. It is a similar revenge that I must have, and I will have it!"

She saw Chupin every two or three days; sometimes going alone to the meeting-place, and at others in Aunt Medea's company. The old poacher came punctually enough, although he was beginning to tire of his task. "I am risking a great deal," he growled. "I fancied that Jean Lacheneur would go and live at the Borderie with his sister. Then I should have been safe. But no; the brigand continues to prowl about with his gun under his arm: and sleeps in the woods at night-time. What game is he after? Why, Father Chupin, of course. On the other hand, I know that my rascally innkeeper over there has abandoned his inn and disappeared. Where is he? Hidden

behind one of these trees, perhaps, in settling what part of my body he shall plunge his knife into." What irritated the old poacher most of all was, that after two months' watching he had come to the conclusion that whatever might have been Martial's connection with Marie-Anne in former times, everything was now all over between them.

But Blanche would not admit this. "Own that they are more cunning than you are, Father Chupin, but don't tell me they don't see each other," she observed one day.

"Cunning—and how?" was the retort. "Since I have been watching the marquis, he hasn't once passed outside the fortifications of Montaignac, while, on the other hand, the postman at Sairmeuse, whom my wife cleverly questioned, declares that he hasn't taken a single letter to the Borderie."

After this, if it had not been for the hope of a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, Chupin would have abandoned his task altogether; as it was, he relaxed his surveillance considerably; coming to the rendezvous with Blanche, chiefly because he had fallen into the habit of claiming some money for his expenses, on each occasion. And when Blanche asked him for an account of everything that Martial had done since their previous meeting, he generally told her anything that came into his head. However, one day, early in September, she interrupted him as he began the same old story, and, looking him steadfastly in the eyes, exclaimed: "Either you are betraying me, Father Chupin, or else you are a fool. Yesterday Martial and Marie-Anne spent a quarter of an hour together at the Croix d'Arcy."

XXXI

AFTER the old physician of Vigano had left the Borderie with his precious burden, Marie-Anne fell into a state of bitter despondency. Many in her situation would perhaps have experienced a feeling of relief, for had she not succeeded in concealing the outcome of her frailty, which none, save perhaps the Abbe Midon, so much as suspected? Hence, her despond-

ency may at first sight seem to have been uncalled for. But then let it be remembered that the sublime instinct of maternity had been awakened in her breast; and when she saw the physician leave her, carrying away her child, she felt as if her soul and body were being rent asunder. When might she hope to set her eyes again on this poor babe, who was doubly dear to her by reason of the very sorrow and anguish he had cost her? Ah, if it had not been for her promise to Maurice, she would have braved public opinion and kept her infant son at the Borderie. Had she not braved calumny already? She had been accused of having three lovers, Chanlouineau, Martial, and Maurice. The comments of the villagers had not affected her; but she had been tortured, and was still tortured by the thought that these people didn't know the truth. Maurice was her husband, and yet she dare not proclaim the fact; she was "Mademoiselle Lacheneur" to all around—a maiden—a living lie. Surely such a situation accounted only too completely for her despondency and distress. And when she thought of her brother she positively shuddered with dismal apprehensions.

Having learned that Jean was roving about the country, she sent for him; but it was not without considerable persuasion that he consented to come and see her at the Borderie. A glance at his appearance sufficed to explain all Chupin's terror. The young fellow's clothes were in tatters, and the expression of his weather-stained, unshaven, unkempt face was ferocious in the extreme. When he entered the cottage, Marie-Anne recoiled with fear. She did not recognize him until he spoke. "It is I, sister," he said gloomily.

"What, you—my poor Jean! you!"

He surveyed himself from head to foot, and with a sneering laugh retorted: "Well, really, I shouldn't like to meet myself at dusk in the forest."

Marie-Anne fancied she could detect a threat behind this ironical remark, and her apprehensions were painful in the extreme. "What a life you must be leading, my poor brother!" she said after a brief pause. "Why didn't you come here sooner? Now I have you here, I shall not let you go. You will not desert me. I need protection and love so much. You will remain with me?"

"That's impossible, Marie-Anne."

"And why?"

Jean averted his glance; his face colored, and it was with

evident hesitation that he replied: "Because I've a right to dispose of my own life, but not of yours. We can't be anything to each other any longer. I deny you to-day, so that you may be able to deny me to-morrow. Yes, although you are now the only person on earth I love. I must and do renounce you. Your worst enemies haven't slandered you more foully than I have done, for before numerous witnesses I have openly declared that I would never set my foot inside a house given you by Chanlouineau."

"What, you said that—you, Jean—you, my brother?"

"Yes, I said it, and with a purpose; for it must be supposed that there is a deadly feud between us, so that neither you nor Maurice d'Escorval may be accused of complicity in any deed of mine."

Marie-Anne gazed at her brother wonderingly. "He is mad!" she murmured, and then with a burst of energy she added: "What do you mean to do? Tell me; I must know."

"Nothing! leave me to myself."

"Jean!"

"Leave me to myself," he repeated roughly.

Marie-Anne felt that her apprehensions were correct. "Take care, take care," she said entreatingly. "Do not tamper with such matters. God's justice will punish those who have wronged us."

But nothing could move Jean Lacheneur, or divert him from his purpose. With a hoarse, discordant laugh, he clapped his hand on his gun and retorted: "That's my justice!"

Marie-Anne almost tottered as she heard these words. She discerned in her brother's mind the same fixed, fatal idea which had lured her father on to destruction—the idea for which he had sacrificed everything—family, friends, fortune, and even his daughter's honor, the idea which had caused so much bloodshed, which had cost the lives of so many innocent men, and had finally led him to the scaffold himself. "Jean," she murmured, "remember our father."

The young fellow's face turned livid, and instinctively he clenched his fists. But the words he uttered were the more impressive, as his voice was calm and low. "It is just because I do remember my father that I am determined justice shall be done. Ah! these wretched nobles wouldn't display such audacity if all sons had my will and determination. A scoundrel like the Duc de Sairmeuse would hesitate before he at-

tacked an honest man if he were only obliged to say to himself: 'If I wrong this man, and even should I kill him, I can not escape retributive justice, for his children will surely call me to account. Their vengeance will fall on me and mine; they will pursue us by day and night, at all hours and in all seasons. We must ever fear their hatred, for they will be implacable and merciless. I shall never leave my house without fear of a bullet; never lift food to my lips without dread of poison. And until I and mine have succumbed, these avengers will prowl round about our home, threatening us at every moment with death, dishonor, ruin, infamy, and misery!'" The young fellow paused, laughed nervously, and then, in a still slower voice, he added: "That is what the Sairmeuses and the Courtornieus have to expect from me." It was impossible to mistake the import of these words. Jean Lacheneur's threats were not the wild ravings of anger. His was a cold, deep-set, premeditated desire for vengeance, which would last as long as he lived—and he took good care that his sister should understand him, for between his teeth he added: "Undoubtedly these people are very high, and I am very low, but when a tiny insect pierces the root of a giant oak, that tree is doomed."

Marie-Anne realized that all her entreaties would fail to turn her brother from his purpose, and yet she could not allow him to leave without making one more effort. It was with clasped hands and in a supplicating voice that she begged him to renounce his projects, but he still remained obdurate, and when changing her tactics she asked him to remain with her at least that evening and share her frugal supper, adding in trembling tones that it might be the last time they would see each other for long years, he again repeated: "You ask me an impossibility!" And yet he was visibly moved, and if his voice was stern, a tear trembled in his eye. She was clinging to him imploringly, when, yielding for one moment to the impulse of nature, he took her in his arms and pressed her to his heart. "Poor sister—poor Marie-Anne," he said, "you will never know what it costs me to refuse your supplications. But I can not yield to them. I have been most imprudent in coming here at all. You don't realize the danger to which you may be exposed if folks suspect that there is any connection between us. I trust that you and Maurice may lead a calm and happy life. It would be a crime for me to mix you up with my wild schemes. Think of me sometimes, but don't try to see me, or even to

find out what has become of me. A man like me struggles, triumphs, or perishes alone." He kissed Marie-Anne passionately, and freed himself from her detaining hands. "Farewell!" he cried; "when you see me again, our father will be avenged!"

Then with one bound he reached the door. She sprang out after him, meaning to call him back, but he had already disappeared. "It is all over," murmured the wretched girl; "my brother is lost. Nothing will restrain him now." And a vague, inexplicable dread invaded her heart. She felt as if she were being slowly but surely drawn into a whirlpool of passion, rancor, vengeance, and crime, and a voice whispered that she would be crushed.

Some days had elapsed after this incident, when one evening, while she was preparing her supper, she heard a rustling sound outside. She turned and looked; some one had slipped a letter under the front door. Without a moment's hesitation she raised the latch and courageously sprang out on to the threshold. No one could be seen. The gloom was well-nigh impenetrable, and when she listened not a sound broke the stillness. With a trembling hand she picked up the letter, walked toward the lamp burning on her supper table, and looked at the address. "From the Marquis de Sairmeuse!" she exclaimed in amazement as she recognized Martial's handwriting. So he had written to her! He had dared to write to her! Her first impulse was to burn the letter; and she was already holding it over the stove when she suddenly thought of her friends concealed at Father Poignot's farm. "For their sake," she thought, "I must read it, and see if they are threatened with danger."

Then hastily opening the missive, she found that it was as follows:

"My dear Marie-Anne—Perhaps you have suspected who it is that has given an entirely new and certainly surprising turn to events. Perhaps you have also understood the motives that guided him. In that case I am amply repaid for my efforts, for you can no longer refuse me your esteem. But my work of reparation is not yet perfect. I have prepared everything for a revision of the judgment that condemned the Baron d'Escorval to death, or for having him pardoned. You must know where the baron is concealed. Acquaint him with my plans and ascertain whether he prefers a revision of judgment or a simple pardon. If he wishes for a new trial, I will give him a

letter of license from the king. I await your reply before acting. MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Marie-Anne's head whirled. This was the second time that Martial had astonished her by the chivalrous spirit of his love. How noble the two men who had loved her and whom she had rejected had proved themselves to be. One of them, Chanlouineau, after dying for her sake, had sought to protect her from beyond the grave. The other, Martial de Sairmeuse, had sacrificed the connections and prejudices of his caste, and hazarded with noble recklessness the political fortunes of his house, so as to insure as far as possible her own happiness and that of those she loved. And yet the man whom she had chosen, the father of her child, Maurce d'Escorval, had not given as much as a sign of life since he left her five months before. But suddenly and without reason Marie-Anne passed from profound admiration to deep distrust. "What if Martial's offer were only a trap?" This was the suspicion that darted through her mind. "Ah!" she thought, "the Marquis de Sairmeuse would be a hero if he were sincere!" And she did not wish him to be a hero.

The result of her suspicions was that she hesitated five days before repairing to the meeting-place where Father Poignot usually awaited her. When she did go, in lieu of the worthy farmer she found the Abbe Midon, who had been greatly alarmed by her prolonged absence. It was night-time, but Marie-Anne, fortunately, knew Martial's letter by heart. The abbe made her repeat it twice, the second time very slowly, and when she had concluded he remarked: "This young man no doubt has the prejudices of his rank and his education; but his heart is noble and generous." And when Marie-Anne disclosed her suspicions: "You are wrong, my child," he added; "the marquis is certainly sincere, and it would be unwise not to take advantage of his generosity. Such, at least, is my opinion. Entrust this letter to me. I will consult the baron, and to-morrow you shall know our decision."

Four and twenty hours later the abbe and Marie-Anne met again at the same spot. "M. d'Escorval," said the priest, "agrees with me that we must trust ourselves to the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Only the baron, being innocent, can not, will not, accept a pardon. He demands a revision of the iniquitous judgment which condemned him—in one word, a new trial."

Marie-Anne had foreseen this determination, and yet she could not help exclaiming: "What! M. d'Escorval means to give himself up to his enemies! To risk his life on the chance of acquittal?" The priest nodded assent, and then knowing that it was quite useless to attempt arguing the point, Marie-Anne submissively remarked: "In this case, I must ask you for a rough draft of the letter I ought to write to the marquis."

For a moment the priest did not reply. He evidently had some misgivings. At last, summoning all his courage, he answered: "It would be better not to write."

"But—"

"It is not that I distrust the marquis, not by any means, but a letter is dangerous; it doesn't always reach the person it's addressed to. You must see M. de Sairmeuse."

Marie-Anne recoiled. "Never! never!" she exclaimed.

The abbe did not seem surprised. "I understand your repugnance, my child," he said gently; "your reputation has suffered greatly through the marquis's attentions. But duty calls, and this is not the time to hesitate. You know that the baron is innocent, and you know, alas, that your father's mad enterprise has ruined him. You must, at least, make this atoning sacrifice." He then explained to her everything she would have to say, and did not leave her until she had promised to see the marquis in person.

It must not be supposed that Marie-Anne's aversion to this interview was due to the reason which the abbe assigned. Her reputation! Alas, she knew that it was lost forever. A fortnight before the prospect of such a meeting would have in no wise disquieted her. Then, though she no longer hated Martial, she thought of him with indifference, whereas now—Perhaps, in choosing the Croix d'Arcy for the rendezvous, she hoped that this spot with its cruel memories would restore aversion to her heart. As she walked along toward the meeting-place, she said to herself that no doubt Martial would wound her feelings by his usual tone of careless gallantry. But in this she was mistaken. The young marquis was greatly agitated, but he did not utter a word unconnected with the purport of the meeting. It was only when the conference was over, and he had consented to all the conditions suggested by the abbe, that he sadly remarked: "We are friends, are we not?"

And in an almost inaudible voice she answered, "Yes."

And that was all. He remounted his horse, which had been

held by a servant, and galloped off in the direction of Montaignac. Breathless, with cheeks on fire, Marie-Anne watched him as, bending low in the saddle, he urged his horse onward over the dusty highway, until at last a bend and some projecting trees finally hid him from view. Then, all of a sudden, she became as it were conscious of her thoughts. "Ah, wretched woman that I am," she exclaimed, "is it possible I could ever love any other man than Maurice, my husband, the father of my child?"

Her voice was still trembling with emotion when she related the particulars of the interview to the abbe. But he did not perceive her trouble, his thoughts being busy with the baron's interests. "I felt sure," said he, "that Martial would agree to our conditions. I was, indeed, so certain that I even made every arrangement for the baron to leave the farm. He will leave it to-morrow night and wait at your house till we receive the letters of license from the king. The heat and bad ventilation of Poignot's loft are certainly retarding his recovery. One of Poignot's boys will bring our baggage to-morrow evening, and at eleven o'clock or so we will place M. d'Escorval in a vehicle and all sup together at the Borderie."

"Heaven comes to my aid!" murmured Marie-Anne as she walked home, reflecting that now she would no longer be alone. With Madame d'Escorval at her side to talk to her of Maurice, and the cheerful presence of her other friends, she would soon be able to chase away those thoughts of Martial now haunting her.

When she awoke the next morning she was in better spirits than she had been for months, and once, while putting her little house in order, she was surprised to find herself singing at her work. Just as eight o'clock in the evening was striking she heard a peculiar whistle. This was a signal from the younger Poignot, who soon appeared laden with an armchair for the sick man, the abbe's medicine chest, and a bag of books. They were all placed in the room upstairs—the room which Chanlouineau had decorated at such cost, and which Marie-Anne now intended for the baron. Young Poignot told her that he had several other things to bring, and nearly an hour afterward, fancying that he might be overloaded, she ventured out to meet him. The night was very dark, and as she hastened on, Marie-Anne failed to notice two figures stooping behind a clump of lilac bushes in her little garden.

XXXII

CHUPIN was at first quite crestfallen when Blanche told him of Martial's meeting with Marie-Anne at the Croix d'Arcy. He was detected with a falsehood on his lips, and feared that the discovery of his duplicity would forever wreck his prospects. He must say good-by to a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, and good-by also to frequent gifts which had enabled him to spare his hoarded treasure, and even to increase it. However, his discomfiture only lasted for a moment. It seemed best to put a bold face on the matter, and accordingly raising his head, he remarked with an affectation of frankness: "I may be stupid no doubt, but I wouldn't deceive a child. I scarcely fancy your information can be correct. Some one must have told you falsely."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "I obtained my information from two persons, who were ignorant of the interest it possessed for me."

"As truly as the sun is in the heavens, I swear—"

"Don't swear; simply confess that you have been very negligent."

Blanche spoke so authoritatively that Chupin considered it best to change his tactics. With an air of abject humility, he admitted that he had relaxed his surveillance on the previous day; he had been very busy in the morning; then one of his boys had injured his foot; and, finally, he had met some friends who persuaded him to go with them to a wine-shop, where he had taken more than usual, so that— He told his story in a whining tone, frequently interrupting himself to affirm his repentance and cover himself with reproaches. "Old drunkard!" he said, "this will teach you not to neglect your duties."

But far from reassuring Blanche, his protestations only made her more suspicious. "All this is very good, Father Chupin," she said dryly, "but what are you going to do now to repair your negligence?"

"What do I intend to do?" he exclaimed, feigning the most

violent anger. "Oh! you shall see. I will prove that no one can deceive me with impunity. There is a small grove near the Borderie, and I shall station myself there; and may the devil seize me if a cat enters that house without my knowing it."

Blanche drew her purse from her pocket, and handed three louis to Chupin, saying as she did so, "Take these, and be more careful in future. Another blunder of the kind, and I shall have to obtain some other person's assistance."

The old poacher went away whistling contentedly. He felt quite reassured. In this, however, he was wrong, for Blanche's generosity was only intended to prevent him fancying that she doubted his veracity. In point of fact, she did doubt it. She believed his promises to be on a par with his past conduct, which, as events had shown, had at the very best been negligent in the extreme. This miserable wretch made it his business to betray others—so why shouldn't he have betrayed her as well? What confidence could she place in his reports? She certainly paid him, but the person who paid him more would unquestionably have the preference. Still, she must know the truth, the whole truth, and how was she to ascertain it? There was but one method—a certain, though a very disagreeable one—she must play the spy herself.

With this idea in her head, she waited impatiently for evening to arrive, and then, directly dinner was over, she summoned Aunt Medea, and requested her company, as she was going out for a walk. The impoverished chaperone made a feeble protest concerning the lateness of the hour. But Blanche speedily silenced her, and bade her get ready at once, adding that she did not wish any one in the chateau to know that they had gone out. Aunt Medea had no other resource than to obey, and in the twinkling of an eye she was ready. The marquis had just been put to bed, the servants were at dinner, and Blanche and her companion reached a little gate leading from the grounds into the open fields without being observed. "Good heavens! Where are we going?" groaned the astonished chaperone.

"What does that matter to you? Come along!" replied Blanche, who, as it may have been guessed, was going to the Borderie. She could have followed the banks of the Oiselle, but she preferred to cut across the fields, thinking she would be less likely to meet any one. The night was very dark, and the hedges and ditches often impeded their progress. On two

occasions Blanche lost her way, while Aunt Medea stumbled again and again over the rough ground, bruising herself against the stones. She groaned; she almost wept; but her terrible niece was pitiless. "Come along!" she cried, "or else I shall leave you to find your way as best you can." And so the poor dependent struggled on.

At last, after more than an hour's tramp, Blanche ventured to breathe. She recognized Chanlouineau's house, a short distance off, and soon afterward she paused in the little grove of which Chupin had spoken. Aunt Medea now timidly inquired if they were at their journey's end—a question which Blanche answered affirmatively. "But be quiet," she added, "and remain where you are. I wish to look about a little."

"What! you are leaving me alone?" ejaculated the frightened chaperon. "Blanche, I entreat you! What are you going to do? Good heavens! you frighten me. You do indeed, Blanche!"

But her niece had gone. She was exploring the grove, looking for Chupin, whom she did not find. This convinced her that the old poacher was deceiving her, and she angrily asked herself if Martial and Marie-Anne were not in the house hard by at that very hour, laughing at her credulity. She then rejoined Aunt Medea, whom she found half-dead with fright, and they both advanced to the edge of the copse, where they could view the front of the house. A flickering, ruddy light illuminated two windows on the upper floor. There was evidently a fire in the room upstairs. "That's right," murmured Blanche bitterly, "Martial is such a chilly personage." She was about to approach the house when a peculiar whistle made her pause. She looked about her, and, through the darkness, she managed to distinguish a man walking toward the Borderie, and carrying a weighty burden. Almost immediately afterward a woman, certainly Marie-Anne, opened the door of the house, and the stranger was admitted. Ten minutes later he reappeared, this time without his burden, and walked briskly away. Blanche was wondering what all this meant, but for the time being she did not venture to approach, and nearly an hour elapsed before she decided to try to satisfy her curiosity by peering through the windows. Accompanied by Aunt Medea, she had just reached the little garden when the door of the cottage opened so suddenly that Blanche and her relative had scarcely time to conceal themselves behind a clump

of lilac bushes. At the same moment Marie-Anne crossed the threshold and walked down the narrow garden path, gained the road, and disappeared. "Wait for me here," said Blanche to her aunt in a strained, unnatural voice, "and whatever happens, whatever you hear, if you wish to finish your days at Courtornieu, not a word! Don't stir from this spot; I will come back again." Then pressing the frightened spinster's arm, she left her alone and went into the cottage.

Marie-Anne, on going out, had left a candle burning on the table in the front room. Blanche seized it and boldly began an exploration of the dwelling. Owing to Chupin's description, she was tolerably familiar with the arrangements on the ground floor, and yet the aspect of the rooms surprised her. They were roughly floored with tiles, and the walls were poorly whitewashed. A massive linen-press, a couple of heavy tables, and a few clumsy chairs, constituted the only furniture in the front apartment, while from the beams above hung numerous bags of grain and bunches of dried herbs. Marie-Anne evidently slept in the back room, which contained an old-fashioned country bedstead, very high and broad, the tall, fluted posts of which were draped with green serge curtains, sliding on iron rings. Fastened to the wall at the head of the bed was a receptacle for holy water. Blanche dipped her finger in the bowl, and found it full to the brim. Then beside the window on a wooden shelf she espied a jug and basin of common earthenware. "It must be confessed that my husband doesn't provide his idol with a very sumptuous abode," she muttered with a sneer. And for a moment, indeed, she was almost on the point of asking herself if jealousy had not led her astray. Remembering Martial's fastidious tastes, she failed to reconcile them with these meagre surroundings. The presence of the holy water, moreover, seemed incompatible with her suspicions. But the latter revived again when she entered the kitchen. A savory soup was bubbling in a pot over the fire, and fragrant stews were simmering in two or three saucepans. Such preparations could not be made for Marie-Anne alone. Whom, then, were they for? At this moment Blanche remembered the ruddy glow which she had noticed through the windows on the floor above. Hastily leaving the kitchen, she climbed the stairs and opened a door she found in front of her. A cry of mingled anger and surprise escaped her lips. She stood on the threshold of the room which Chan-

louineau in the boldness of his passion had designed to be the sanctuary of his love. Here everything was beautiful and luxurious: "Ah, so after all it's true," exclaimed Blanche in a paroxysm of jealousy. "And I was fancying that everything was too meagre and too poor. Downstairs everything is so arranged that visitors may not suspect the truth! Ah, now I recognize Martial's astonishing talent for dissimulation; he is so infatuated with this creature that he is even anxious to shield her reputation. He keeps his visits secret and hides himself up here. Yes, here it is that they laugh at me, the deluded, forsaken wife whose marriage was but a mockery!"

She had wished to know the truth, and now she felt she knew it. Certainty was less cruel than everlasting suspicion, and she even took a bitter delight in examining the appointments of the apartment, which to her mind proved how deeply Martial must be infatuated. She felt the heavy curtains of brocaded silken stuff with trembling hands; she tested the thickness of the rich carpet with her feet; the embroidered coverlid on the palissandre bedstead, the mirrors, the hundred knickknacks on the tables and the mantelshelf—all in turn met with her attentive scrutiny. Everything indicated that some one was expected—the bright fire—the cozy armchair beside it, the slippers on the rug. And whom would Marie-Anne expect but Martial? No doubt the man whom Blanche had seen arriving had come to announce the marquis's approach, and Marie-Anne had gone to meet him.

Curiously enough, on the hearth stood a bowl of soup, still warm, and which Marie-Anne had evidently been about to drink when she heard the messenger's signal. Blanche was still wondering how she could profit of her discoveries, when she espied a chest of polished oak standing open on a table near a glass door leading into an adjoining dressing-room. She walked toward it and perceived that it contained a number of tiny vials and boxes. It was indeed the Abbe Midon's medicine chest, which Marie-Anne had placed here in readiness, should it be needed when the baron arrived, weak from his nocturnal journey. Blanche was examining the contents when suddenly she noticed two bottles of blue glass, on which "poison" was inscribed. "Poison!"—the word seemed to fascinate her, and by a diabolical inspiration she associated these vials with the bowl of soup standing on the hearth. "And why not?" she muttered. "I could escape afterward." Another thought made

her pause, however. Martial would no doubt return with Marie-Anne, and perhaps he would drink this broth. She hesitated for a moment, and then took one of the vials in her hand, murmuring as she did so: "God will decide; it is better he should die than belong to another." She had hitherto acted like one bewildered, but this act, simple in its performance, but terrible in its import, seemed to restore all her presence of mind. "What poison is it?" thought she; "ought I to administer a large or a small dose?" With some little difficulty she opened the bottle and poured a small portion of its contents into the palm of her hand. The poison was a fine, white powder, glistening like pulverized glass. "Can it really be sugar?" thought Blanche; and with the view of making sure she moistened a finger-tip, and gathered on it a few atoms of the powder, which she applied to her tongue. Its taste was not unlike that of an apple. She wiped her tongue with her handkerchief, and then without hesitation or remorse, without even turning pale, she poured the entire contents of the bottle into the bowl. Her self-possession was so perfect that she even stirred the broth, so that the powder might more rapidly dissolve. She next tasted it, and found that it had a slightly bitter flavor—not sufficiently perceptible, however, to awaken distrust. All that now remained was to escape, and she was already walking toward the door when, to her horror, she heard some one coming up the stairs. What should she do? Where could she conceal herself? She now felt so sure that she would be detected that she almost decided to throw the contents of the bowl into the fire, and then face the intruders. But no—a chance remained—the dressing-room? She darted into it, without daring, however, to close the door, for the least click of the lock might betray her.

Immediately afterward Marie-Anne entered the apartment, followed by a peasant carrying a large bundle. "Ah! here is my candle!" she exclaimed, as she crossed the threshold. "Joy must be making me lose my wits! I could have sworn that I left it on the table downstairs."

Blanche shuddered. She had not thought of this circumstance before.

"Where shall I put these clothes?" asked the peasant.

"Lay them down here. I will arrange them by and by," replied Marie-Anne.

The youth dropped his heavy burden with a sigh of relief.

"That's the last," he exclaimed. "Now our gentleman can come."

"At what o'clock will he start?" inquired Marie-Anne.

"At eleven. It will be nearly midnight when he gets here."

Marie-Anne glanced at the magnificent timepiece on the mantelshelf. "I have still three hours before me," said she; "more time than I need. Supper is ready, I am going to set the table here by the fire. Tell him to bring a good appetite with him."

"I won't forget, mademoiselle; thank you for having come to meet me. The load wasn't so very heavy, but it was awkward to handle."

"Won't you take a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks. I must make haste back, Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"Good night, Poignot."

Blanche had never heard this name of Poignot before; it had no meaning for her. Ah, if she had heard M. d'Escorval or the abbe mentioned, she might perhaps have doubted the truth; her resolution might have wavered and—who knows? But unfortuately, young Poignot, in referring to the baron, had spoken of him as "our gentleman," while Marie-Anne said, "he." And to Blanche's mind they both of them referred to Martial. Yes, unquestionably it must be the Marquis de Sairmeuse, who would arrive at midnight. She was sure of it. It was he who had sent this messenger with a parcel of clothes—a proceeding which could only mean that he was going to establish himself at the Borderie. Perhaps he would cast aside all secrecy and live there openly, regardless of his rank, his dignity, and duties; forgetful even of his prejudices as well. These conjectures could only fire Blanche's jealous fury. Why should she hesitate or tremble after that? The only thing she had to fear now was that Marie-Anne might enter the dressing-room and find her there. She had but little anxiety concerning Aunt Medea, who, it is true, was still in the garden; but after the orders she had received the poor dependent would remain as still as a stone behind the lilac bushes, and, if needs be, during the whole night. On the other hand, Marie-Anne would remain alone in the house during another two hours and a half, and Blanche reflected that this would give her ample time to watch the effects of the poison on her hated rival. When the crime was discovered she would be far away. No one knew she was not at Courtornieu; no one had seen her leave the chateau;

Aunt Medea would be as silent as the grave. And, besides, who would dare to accuse the Marquise de Sairmeuse, *nee* Blanche de Courtornieu, of murder? One thing that worried Blanche was that Marie-Anne seemed to pay no attention to the broth. She had, in fact, forgotten it. She had opened the bundle of clothes, and was now busily arranging them in a wardrobe near the bed. Who talks of presentiments! She was as gay and vivacious as in her happiest days; and while she folded the clothes hummed an air that Maurice had often sung. She felt that her troubles were nearly over, for her friends would soon be round her, and a brighter time seemed near at hand. When she had put all the clothes away, she shut the wardrobe and drew a small table up before the fire. It was not till then that she noticed the bowl standing on the hearth. "How stupid I am!" she said, with a laugh; and taking the bowl in her hands, she raised it to her lips.

Blanche heard Marie-Anne's exclamation plainly enough; she saw what she was doing; and yet she never felt the slightest remorse. However, Marie-Anne drank but one mouthful, and then, in evident disgust, she set the bowl down. A horrible dread made the watcher's heart stand still, and she wondered whether her victim had detected any peculiar taste in the soup. No, she had not; but, owing to the fire having fallen low, it had grown nearly cold, and a slight coating of grease floated on its surface. Taking a spoon, Marie-Anne skimmed the broth carefully, and stirred it up. Then, being thirsty, she drank the liquid almost at one draft, laid the bowl on the mantelpiece, and resumed her work.

The crime was perpetrated. The future no longer depended on Blanche de Courtornieu's will. Come what would, she was a murderess. But though she was conscious of her crime, the excess of her jealous hatred prevented her from realizing its enormity. She said to herself that she had only accomplished an act of justice, that in reality her vengeance was scarcely cruel enough for the wrongs she had suffered, and that nothing could indeed fully atone for the tortures inflicted on her. But in a few moments grievous misgivings took possession of her mind. Her knowledge of the effects of poison was extremely limited. She had expected to see Marie-Anne fall dead before her, as if stricken down by a thunderbolt. But no, several minutes passed, and Marie-Anne continued her preparations for supper as if nothing had occurred. She spread a white cloth

over the table, smoothed it with her hands, and placed a cruet-stand and salt-cellar on it. Blanche's heart was beating so violently that she could scarcely realize why its throbbings were not heard in the adjoining room. Her assurance had been great, but now the fear of punishment which usually precedes remorse crept over her mind; and the idea that her victim might enter the dressing-room made her turn pale with fear. At last she saw Marie-Anne take the light and go downstairs. Blanche was left alone, and the thought of escaping again occurred to her; but how could she possibly leave the house without being seen? Must she wait there, hidden in that nook, forever? "That couldn't have been poison. It doesn't act," she muttered in a rage.

Alas! it did act, as she herself perceived when Marie-Anne reentered the room. The latter had changed frightfully during the brief interval she had spent on the ground floor. Her face was livid and mottled with purple spots, her distended eyes glittered with a strange brilliancy, and she let a pile of plates she carried fall on the table with a crash.

"The poison! it begins to act at last!" thought Blanche.

Marie-Anne stood on the hearthrug, gazing wildly round her, as if seeking for the cause of her incomprehensible sufferings. She passed and repassed her hand across her forehead, which was bathed in cold sweat; she gasped for breath, and then suddenly overcome with nausea, she staggered, pressed her hands convulsively to her breast, and sank into the armchair, crying: "Oh, God! how I suffer!"

Kneeling by the door of the dressing-room which was only partly closed, Blanche eagerly watched the workings of the poison she had administered. She was so near her victim that she could distinguish the throbbing of her temples, and sometimes she fancied she could feel on her own cheek her rival's breath, scorching her like flame. An utter prostration followed Marie-Anne's paroxysm of agony; and if it had not been for the convulsive working of her mouth and labored breathing, it might have been supposed that she was dead. But soon the nausea returned, and she was seized with vomiting. Each effort seemed to contract her body; and gradually a ghastly tint crept over her face, the spots on her cheeks became of a deeper tint, her eyes seemed as if they were about to burst from their sockets, and great drops of perspiration rolled down her cheeks. Her sufferings must have been intolerable. She moaned feebly

at times, and at intervals gave vent to truly heartrending shrieks. Then she faltered fragmentary sentences; she begged piteously for water, or entreated Heaven to shorten her tortures. "Ah, it is horrible! I suffer too much! My God! grant me death!" She invoked all the friends she had ever known, calling for aid in a despairing voice. She called on Madame d'Escorval, the abbe, Maurice, her brother, Chanlouineau, and Martial!

Martial!—that name more than sufficed to chase all pity from Blanche's heart. "Go on! call your lover, call!" she said to herself, bitterly. "He will come too late." And as Marie-Anne repeated the name, in a tone of agonized entreaty: "Suffer!" continued Blanche, "suffer, you deserve it! You imparted to Martial the courage to forsake me, his wife, as a drunken lackey would abandon the lowest of degraded creatures! Die, and my husband will return to me repentant." No, she had no pity. She felt a difficulty in breathing, but that merely resulted from the instinctive horror which the sufferings of others inspire—a purely physical impression, which is adorned with the fine name of sensibility, but which is, in reality, the grossest selfishness.

And yet, Marie-Anne was sinking perceptibly. She had fallen on to the floor, during one of her attacks of sickness, and now she even seemed unable to moan; her eyes closed, and after a spasm which brought a bloody foam to her lips, her head sank back, and she lay motionless on the hearthrug.

"It is over," murmured Blanche, rising to her feet. To her surprise her own limbs trembled so acutely that she could scarcely stand. Her will was still firm and implacable; but her flesh failed her. She had never even imagined a scene like that she had just witnessed. She knew that poison caused death; but she had not suspected the agony of such a death. She no longer thought of increasing her victim's sufferings by upbraiding her. Her only desire now was to leave the house, the very floor of which seemed to scorch her feet. A strange, inexplicable sensation was creeping over her; it was not yet fright, but rather the stupor that follows the perpetration of a terrible crime. Still, she compelled herself to wait a few moments longer; then seeing that Marie-Anne still remained motionless, with closed eyes, she ventured to open the door softly, and enter the room in which her victim was lying. But she had not taken three steps forward before Marie-Anne, as if she had

been galvanized by an electric battery, suddenly rose and extended her arms to bar her enemy's passage. This movement was so unexpected and so appalling that Blanche recoiled. "The Marquise de Sairmeuse," faltered Marie-Anne. "You, Blanche—here!" And finding an explanation of her sufferings in the presence of this young woman, who once had been her friend, but who was now her bitterest enemy, she exclaimed: "It is you who have murdered me!"

Blanche de Courtornieu's nature was one of those that break but never bend. Since she had been detected, nothing in the world would induce her to deny her guilt. She advanced boldly, and in a firm voice replied: "Yes, I have taken my revenge. Do you think I didn't suffer that evening when you sent your brother to take my newly-wedded husband away, so that I have never since gazed upon his face?"

"Your husband! I sent my brother to take him away! I do not understand you."

"Do you dare deny, then, that you are not Martial's mistress?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress! Why, I saw him yesterday for the first time since the Baron d'Escorval's escape." The effort which Marie-Anne had made to rise and speak had exhausted her strength. She fell back in the armchair.

But Blanche was pitiless. "You only saw Martial then," she said. "Pray, tell me, who gave you this costly furniture, these silk hangings, all the luxury that surrounds you?"

"Chanlouineau."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "So be it," she said, with an ironical smile. "But you are not waiting for Chanlouineau this evening? Have you warmed these slippers and laid this table for Chanlouineau? Was it Chanlouineau who sent his clothes by a peasant named Poignot? You see that I know everything?" She paused for some reply; but her victim was silent. "Whom are you waiting for?" insisted Blanche. "Answer me!"

"I can not!"

"Ah, of course not, because you know that it is your lover who is coming, you wretched woman—my husband, Martial!"

Marie-Anne was considering the situation as well as her intolerable sufferings and troubled mind would permit. Could she name the persons she was expecting? Would not any

mention of the Baron d'Escorval to Blanche ruin and betray him? They were hoping for a letter of license for a revision of judgment, but he was none the less under sentence of death, and liable to be executed in twenty-four hours.

"So you refuse to tell me whom you expect here—at midnight," repeated the marquise.

"I refuse," gasped Marie-Anne; but at the same time she was seized with a sudden impulse. Although the slightest movement caused her intolerable agony, she tore her dress open, and drew a folded paper from her bosom. "I am not the Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress," she said, in an almost inaudible voice. "I am Maurice d'Escorval's wife. Here is the proof —read."

Blanche had scarcely glanced at the paper than she turned as pale as her victim. Her sight failed her; there was a strange ringing in her ears, and a cold sweat started from every pore in her skin. This paper was the marriage certificate of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, drawn up by the cure of Vigano, witnessed by the old physician and Bavois, and sealed with the parish seal. The proof was indisputable. She had committed a useless crime; she had murdered an innocent woman. The first good impulse of her life made her heart beat more quickly. She did not stop to consider; she forgot the danger to which she exposed herself, and in a ringing voice she cried: "Help! help!"

Eleven o'clock was just striking in the country; every one was naturally abed, and, moreover, the nearest farmhouse was half a league away. Blanche's shout was apparently lost in the stillness of the night. In the garden below Aunt Medea perhaps heard it; but she would have allowed herself to be cut to pieces rather than stir from her place. And yet there was one other who heard that cry of distress. Had Blanche and her victim been less overwhelmed with despair, they would have heard a noise on the stairs, which at that very moment were creaking under the tread of a man, who was cautiously climbing them. But he was not a savior, for he did not answer the appeal. However, even if there had been help at hand, it would now have come too late.

Marie-Anne felt that there was no longer any hope for her, and that it was the chill of death which was creeping toward her heart. She felt that her life was fast ebbing away. So, when Blanche turned as if to rush out in search of assistance,

she detained her with a gesture, and gently called her by her name. The murderess paused. "Do not summon any one," murmured Marie-Anne; "it would do no good. Let me at least die in peace. It will not be long now."

"Hush! do not speak so. You must not—you shall not die! If you should die—great God! what would my life be afterward!"

Marie-Anne made no reply. The poison was rapidly completing its work. The sufferer's breath literally whistled as it forced its way through her inflamed throat. When she moved her tongue, it scorched her palate as if it had been a piece of hot iron; her lips were parched and swollen; and her hands, inert and paralyzed, would no longer obey her will.

But the horror of the situation restored Blanche's calmness. "All is not yet lost," she exclaimed. "It was in that great box there on the table that I found the white powder I poured into the bowl. You must know what it is; you must know the antidote."

Marie-Anne sadly shook her head. "Nothing can save me now," she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice; "but I don't complain. Who knows the misery from which death may preserve me? I don't crave life; I have suffered so much during the past year; I have endured such humiliation; I have wept so much! A curse was on me!" She was suddenly endowed with that clearness of mental vision so often granted to the dying. She saw how she had wrought her own undoing by consenting to play the perfidious part her father had assigned her, and how she herself had paved the way for the slander, crimes, and misfortunes of which she had been the victim.

Her voice grew fainter and fainter. Worn out with suffering, a sensation of drowsiness stole over her. She was falling asleep in the arms of death. But suddenly such a terrible thought found its way into her failing mind that she gasped with agony: "My child!" And then, regaining, by a superhuman effort, as much will, energy, and strength as the poison would allow her, she straightened herself in the armchair, and though her features were contracted by mortal anguish, yet with an energy of which no one would have supposed her capable, she exclaimed: "Blanche, listen to me. It is the secret of my life which I am going to reveal to you; no one suspects it. I have a son by Maurice. Alas! many months have elapsed since my husband disappeared. If he is dead, what will become

of my child? Blanche, you, who have killed me, swear to me that you will be a mother to my child!"

Blanche was utterly overcome. "I swear!" she sobbed; "I swear!"

"On that condition, but on that condition alone, I pardon you. But take care! Do not forget your oath! Blanche, Heaven sometimes allows the dead to avenge themselves. You have sworn, remember. My spirit will allow you no rest if you do not fulfil your vow!"

"I will remember," sobbed Blanche; "I will remember. But the child—"

"Ah! I was afraid—cowardly creature that I was! I dreaded the shame—then Maurice insisted—I sent my child away—your jealousy and my death are the punishment of my weakness. Poor child! abandoned to strangers! Wretched woman that I am! Ah! this suffering is too horrible. Blanche, remember—"

She spoke again, but her words were indistinct, inaudible. Blanche frantically seized the dying woman's arm, and endeavored to arouse her. "To whom have you confided your child?" she repeated; "to whom? Marie-Anne—a word more—a single word—a name, Marie-Anne!"

The unfortunate woman's lips moved, but the death-rattle already sounded in her throat; a terrible convulsion shook her frame; she slid down from the chair, and fell full length upon the floor. Marie-Anne was dead—dead, and she had not disclosed the name of the old physician at Vigano to whom she had entrusted her child. She was dead, and the terrified murderess stood in the middle of the room as rigid and motionless as a statue. It seemed to her that madness—a madness like that which had stricken her father—was working in her brain. She forgot everything; she forgot that some one was expected at midnight; that time was flying, and that she would surely be discovered if she did not fly. But the man who had entered the house when she cried for help was watching over her. As soon as he saw that Marie-Anne had breathed her last, he pushed against the door, and thrust his leering face into the room.

"Chupin!" faltered Blanche.

"In the flesh," he responded. "This was a grand chance for you. Ah, ha! The business riled your stomach a little; but nonsense! that will soon pass off. But we must not dawdle here: some one may come in. Let us make haste."

Mechanically the murderess stepped forward, but Marie-

Anne's dead body lay between her and the door, barring the passage. To leave the room it was necessary to step over her victim's lifeless form. She had not courage to do so, and recoiled with a shudder. But Chupin was troubled by no such scruples. He sprang across the body, lifted Blanche as if she had been a child, and carried her out of the house. He was intoxicated with joy. He need have no fears for the future now; for Blanche was bound to him by the strongest of chains —complicity in crime. He saw himself on the threshold of a life of constant revelry. All remorse anent Lacheneur's betrayal had departed. He would be sumptuously fed, lodged, and clothed; and, above all, effectually protected by an army of servants.

While these agreeable thoughts were darting through his mind, the cool night air was reviving the terror-stricken Marquise de Sairmeuse. She intimated that she should prefer to walk, and accordingly Chupin deposited her on her feet some twenty paces from the house. Aunt Medea was already with them after the fashion of a dog left at the door by its master while the latter goes into the house. She had instinctively followed her niece, when she perceived the old poacher carrying her out of the cottage.

"We must not stop to talk," said Chupin. "Come, I will lead the way." And taking Blanche by the arm, he hastened toward the grove. "Ah! so Marie-Anne had a child," he remarked, as they hurried. "She pretended to be such a saint! But where the deuce has she placed it?"

"I shall find it," replied Blanche.

"Hum! that is easier said than done," quoth the old poacher, thoughtfully.

Scarcely had he spoken than a shrill laugh resounded in the darkness. In the twinkling of an eye Chupin had released his hold on Blanche's arm, and assumed an attitude of defense. The precaution was fruitless; for at the same moment a man concealed among the trees bounded upon him from behind, and, plunging a knife four times into his writhing body, exclaimed: "Holy Virgin! now is my vow fulfilled! I shall no longer have to eat with my fingers!"

"Balstain! the innkeeper!" groaned the wounded man, sinking to the ground.

Blanche seemed rooted to the spot with horror; but Aunt Medea for once in her life had some energy in her fear.

"Come!" she shrieked, dragging her niece away. "Come—he is dead!"

Not quite, for the old traitor had sufficient strength remaining to crawl home and knock at the door. His wife and youngest boy were sleeping soundly, and it was his eldest son, who had just returned home, who opened the door. Seeing his father prostrate on the ground, the young man thought he was intoxicated, and tried to lift him and carry him into the house, but the old poacher begged him to desist. "Don't touch me," said he. "It is all over with me! but listen: Lacheneur's daughter has just been poisoned by Madame Blanche. It was to tell you this that I dragged myself here. This knowledge is worth a fortune, my boy, if you are not a fool!" And then he died without being able to tell his family where he had concealed the price of Lacheneur's blood.

XXXIII

IT will be recollected that of all those who witnessed the Baron d'Escorval's terrible fall over the precipice below the citadel of Montaignac, the Abbe Midon was the only one who did not despair. He set about his task with more than courage, with a reverent faith in the protection of Providence, remembering Ambroise Pare's sublime phrase: "I dress the wound —God heals it." That he was right to hope was conclusively shown by the fact that after six months' sojourn in Father Poignot's house, the baron was able to sit up and even to limp about with the aid of crutches. On reaching this stage of recovery, however, when it was essential he should take some little exercise, he was seriously inconvenienced by the diminutive proportions of Poignot's loft, so that he welcomed with intense delight the prospect of taking up his abode at the Borderie with Marie-Anne; and when indeed the abbe fixed the day for moving, he grew as impatient for it to arrive as a schoolboy is for the holidays. "I am suffocating here," he said to his wife, "literally suffocating. The time passes slowly. When will the happy day come?"

It came at last. The morning was spent in packing up such things as they had managed to procure during their stay at the farm; and soon after nightfall Poignot's elder son began carrying them away. "Everything is at the Borderie," said the honest fellow, on returning from his last trip, "and Mademoiselle Lacheneur bids the baron bring a good appetite."

"I shall have one, never fear!" responded M. d'Escorval gaily. "We shall all have one."

Father Poignot himself was busy harnessing his best horse to the cart which was to convey the baron to his new home. The worthy man felt sad as he thought that these guests, for whose sake he had incurred such danger, were now going to leave him. He felt he should acutely miss them, that the house would seem gloomy and deserted after they had left. He would allow no one else to arrange the mattress intended for M. d'Escorval comfortably in the cart; and when he had done this to his satisfaction, he murmured, with a sigh: "It's time to start!" and turned to climb the narrow staircase leading to the loft.

M. d'Escorval with a patient's natural egotism had not thought of the parting. But when he saw the honest farmer coming to bid him good-by, with signs of deep emotion on his face, he forgot all the comforts that awaited him at the Borderie, in the remembrance of the royal and courageous hospitality he had received in the house he was about to leave. The tears sprang to his eyes. "You have rendered me a service which nothing can repay, Father Poignot," he said, with intense feeling. "You have saved my life."

"Oh! we won't talk of that, baron. In my place, you would have done the same—neither more nor less."

"I shall not attempt to express my thanks, but I hope to live long enough to show my gratitude."

The staircase was so narrow that they had considerable difficulty in carrying the baron down; but finally they had him stretched comfortably on his mattress in the cart; a few handfuls of straw being scattered over his limbs so as to hide him from the gaze of any inquisitive passers-by. The latter was scarcely to be expected, it is true, for it was now fully eleven o'clock at night. Parting greetings were exchanged, and then the cart which young Poignot drove with the utmost caution started slowly on its way.

On foot, some twenty paces in the rear, came Madame

d'Escorval, leaning on the abbe's arm. It was very dark, but even if they had been in the full sunshine, the former cure of Sairmeuse might have encountered any of his old parishioners without the least danger of detection. He had allowed his hair and beard to grow; his tonsure had entirely disappeared, and his sedentary life had caused him to become much stouter. He was clad like all the well-to-do peasants of the neighborhood, his face being partially hidden by a large slouch-hat. He had not felt so much at ease for months past. Obstacles which had originally seemed to him insurmountable had now vanished, and in the near future he saw the baron's innocence proclaimed by an impartial tribunal, while he himself was reinstalled in the parsonage of Sairmeuse. If it had not been for his recollection of Maurice he would have had nothing to trouble his mind. Why had young D'Escorval given no sign of life? It seemed impossible for him to have met with any misfortune without hearing of it, for there was brave old Corporal Bavois, who would have risked anything to come and warn them if Maurice had been in danger. The abbe was so absorbed in these reflections that he did not notice Madame d'Escorval was leaning more heavily on his arm and gradually slackening her pace. "I am ashamed to confess it," she said at last, "but I can go no farther. It is so long since I was out of doors that I have almost forgotten how to walk."

"Fortunately we are almost there," replied the priest; and indeed a moment afterward young Poignot drew up at the corner of the foot-path leading to the Borderie. Telling the baron that the journey was ended, he gave a low whistle, like that which had warned Marie-Anne of his arrival a few hours before. No one appeared or replied, so he whistled again in a louder key, and then a third time with all his might—still there was no response. Madame d'Escorval and the abbe had now overtaken the cart. "It's very strange that Marie-Anne doesn't hear me," remarked young Poignot, turning to them. "We can't take the baron to the house until we have seen her. She knows that very well. Shall I run up and warn her?"

"She's asleep, perhaps," replied the abbe; "stay with your horse, my boy, and I'll go and wake her."

He certainly did not feel the least uneasiness. All was calm and still outside, and a bright light shone through the windows of the upper floor. Still, when he perceived the open door, a vague presentiment of evil stirred his heart. "What can this

mean?" he thought. There was no light in the lower rooms, and he had to feel for the staircase with his hands. At last he found it and went up. Another open door was in front of him; he stepped forward and reached the threshold. Then, so suddenly that he almost fell backward, he paused horror-stricken at the sight before him. Poor Marie-Anne was lying on the floor. Her eyes, which were wide open, were covered with a white film; her tongue was hanging black and swollen from her mouth. "Dead!" faltered the priest; "dead!" But this could not be. The abbe conquered his weakness, and approaching the poor girl, he took her by the hand. "Poisoned!" he murmured: "poisoned with arsenic." He rose to his feet, and was casting a bewildered glance around the room when his eyes fell on his medicine chest standing open on a side-table. He rushed toward it, took out a vial, uncorked it, and turned it over on the palm of his hand—it was empty. "I was not mistaken!" he exclaimed.

But he had no time to lose in conjectures. The first thing to be done was to induce the baron to return to the farmhouse without telling him of the terrible misfortune which had occurred. It would not be very difficult to find a pretext. Summoning all his courage, the priest hastened back to the wagon, and with well-affected calmness told M. d'Escorval that it would be impossible for him to take up his abode at the Borderie at present, that several suspicious-looking characters had been seen prowling about, and that they must be more prudent than ever now, so as not to render Martial's intervention useless. At last, but not without considerable reluctance, the baron yielded. "As you desire it, cure," he sighed, "I must obey. Come, Poignot, my boy, drive me back to your father's house."

Madame d'Escorval took a seat in her cart beside her husband. The priest stood watching them as they drove off, and it was not until the sound of the wheels had died away in the distance that he ventured to return to the Borderie. He was climbing the stairs again when he heard a faint moan in the room where Marie-Anne was lying. The sound sent all his blood wildly rushing to his heart, and with one bound he had reached the upper floor. Beside the corpse a young man was kneeling, weeping bitterly. The expression of his face, his attitude, his sobs betrayed the wildest despair. He was so lost in grief that he did not observe the abbe's entrance. Who was this mourner who had found his way to the house of

death? At last, however, though he did not recognize him, the priest divined who he must be. "Jean!" he cried, "Jean Lacheneur!" The young fellow sprang to his feet with a pale face and threatening look. "Who are you?" he asked vehemently. "What are you doing here? What do you want with me?"

The former cure of Sairmeuse was so effectually disguised by his peasant dress and long beard that he had to name himself. "You, Monsieur Abbe," exclaimed Jean. "It is God who has sent you here! Marie-Anne can not be dead! You, who have saved so many others, will save her." But as the priest sadly pointed to heaven, the young fellow paused, and his face became more ghastly looking than before. He understood now that there was no hope. "Ah!" he murmured in a desponding tone, "fate shows us no mercy. I have been watching over Marie-Anne from a distance; and this evening I was coming to warn her to be cautious, for I knew she was in great danger. An hour ago, while I was eating my supper in a wine-shop at Sairmeuse, Grollet's son same in. 'Is that you, Jean?' said he. 'I just saw Chupin hiding near your sister's house; when he observed me, he slunk away.' When I heard that, I hastened here like a crazy man. I ran, but when fate is against you, what can you do? I arrived too late!"

The abbe reflected for a moment. "Then you suppose it was Chupin?" he asked.

"I don't suppose; I feel certain that it was he—the miserable traitor!—who committed this foul deed."

"Still, what motive could he have had?"

With a discordant laugh that almost seemed a yell, Jean answered: "Oh, you may be certain that the daughter's blood will yield him a richer reward than did the father's. Chupin has been the instrument; but it was not he who conceived the crime. You will have to seek higher for the culprit, much higher, in the finest chateau of the country, in the midst of an army of retainers at Sairmeuse."

"Wretched man, what do you mean?"

"What I say." And he coldly added: "Martial de Sairmeuse is the assassin."

The priest recoiled. "You are mad!" he said severely.

But Jean gravely shook his head. "If I seem so to you, sir," he replied, "it is only because you are ignorant of Martial's

wild passion for Marie-Anne. He wanted to make her his mistress. She had the audacity to refuse the honor; and that was a crime for which she must be punished. When the Marquis de Sairmeuse became convinced that Lacheneur's daughter would never be his, he poisoned her, that she might not belong to any one else." All efforts to convince Jean of the folly of his accusations would at that moment have been vain. No proofs would have convinced him. He would have closed his eyes to all evidence.

"To-morrow, when he is more calm, I will reason with him," thought the abbe; and then he added aloud: "We can't allow the poor girl's body to remain here on the floor. Help me, and we will place it on the bed."

Jean trembled from head to foot, and his hesitation was perceptible; but at last, after a severe struggle, he complied. No one had ever yet slept on this bed which Chanlouineau had destined for Marie-Anne, saying to himself that it should be for her, or for no one. And Marie-Anne it was who rested there the first—sleeping the sleep of death. When the sad task was accomplished, Jean threw himself into the same armchair in which Marie-Anne had breathed her last, and with his face buried in his hands, and his elbows resting on his knees, he sat there as silent and motionless as the statues of sorrow placed above the last resting places of the dead.

In the mean while the abbe knelt by the bedside and began reciting the prayers for the departed, entreating God to grant peace and happiness in heaven to her who had suffered so much on earth. But he prayed only with his lips, for in spite of all his efforts, his mind would persist in wandering. He was striving to solve the mystery that enshrouded Marie-Anne's death. Had she been murdered? Was it possible that she had committed suicide? The latter idea occurred to him without his having any great faith in it; but, on the other hand, how could her death possibly be the result of crime? He had carefully examined the room, and had discovered nothing that betrayed a stranger's visit. All he could prove was that his vial of arsenic was empty, and that Marie-Anne had been poisoned by absorbing it in the broth, a few drops of which were left in the bowl standing on the mantelpiece. "When morning comes," thought the abbe, "I will look outside."

Accordingly, at daybreak he went into the garden and made a careful examination of the premises. At first he saw nothing

that gave him the least clue, and he was about to abandon his investigations when, on entering the little grove, he espied a large dark stain on the grass a few paces off. He went nearer —it was blood! In a state of great excitement, he summoned Jean, to inform him of the discovery.

"Some one has been murdered here," said young Lacheneur; "and only last night, for the blood has scarcely had time to dry."

"The victim must have lost a great deal of blood," remarked the priest; "it might be possible to discover who he was by following these stains."

"Yes, I will try," replied Jean with alacrity. "Go into the house, sir; I will soon be back again."

A child might have followed the trail of the wounded man, for the blood-stains left along his line of route were so frequent and distinct. These telltale marks led to Chupin's hovel, the door of which was closed. Jean rapped, however, without the slightest hesitation, and when the old poacher's eldest son opened the door, he perceived a very singular spectacle. The dead body had been thrown on to the ground, in a corner of the hut, the bedstead was overturned and broken, all the straw had been torn from the mattress, and the dead man's wife and sons, armed with spades and pickaxes, were wildly overturning the beaten soil that formed the hovel's only floor. They were seeking for the hidden treasure, for the twenty thousand francs in gold, paid for Lacheneur's betrayal! "What do you want?" asked the widow roughly.

"I want to see Father Chupin."

"Can't you see that he's been murdered," replied one of the sons. And brandishing his pick close to Jean's head, he added: "And you're the murderer, perhaps. But that's for justice to determine. Now decamp if you don't want me to do for you."

Jean could scarcely restrain himself from punishing young Chupin for his threat, but under the circumstances a conflict was scarcely permissible. Accordingly, he turned without another word, hastened back to the Borderie. Chupin's death upset all his plans, and greatly irritated him. "I swore that the wretch who betrayed my father should perish by my hand," he murmured; "and now I am deprived of my vengeance. Some one has cheated me out of it. Who could it be? Can Martial have assassinated Chupin after he murdered Marie-Anne? The

best way to assure one's self of an accomplice's silence is certainly to kill him."

Jean had reached the Borderie, and was on the point of going upstairs when he fancied he heard some one talking in the back room. "That's strange," he said to himself. "Who can it be?" And yielding to the impulse of curiosity, he tapped against the communicating door.

The abbe instantly made his appearance, hurriedly closing the door behind him. He was very pale and agitated.

"Who's there?" inquired Jean eagerly.

"Why, Maurice d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois."

"My God!"

"And it's a miracle that Maurice has not been upstairs."

"But whence does he come from? Why have we had no news of him?"

"I don't know. He has only been here five minutes. Poor boy! after I told him his father was safe, his first words were: 'And Marie-Anne?' He loves her more devotedly than ever. He comes home with his heart full of her, confident and hopeful; and I tremble—I fear to tell him the truth."

"Yes, it's really too terrible!"

"Now I have warned you; be prudent—and come in." They entered the room together; and both Maurice and the old soldier greeted Jean warmly. They had not seen one another since the duel at La Reche, interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers; and when they separated that day they scarcely expected to meet again.

Now Maurice, however, was in the best of spirits, and it was with a smile on his face that he remarked: "I am glad you've come. There's nothing to fear now." Then turning to the abbe, he remarked: "But I just promised to let you know the reason of my long silence. Three days after we crossed the frontier—Corporal Bavois and I—we reached Turin. We were tired out. We went to a small inn, and they gave us a room with two beds. While we were undressing, the corporal said to me: 'I am quite capable of sleeping two whole days without waking,' while I promised myself at least a good twelve hours' rest; but we reckoned without our host, as you'll see. It was scarcely daybreak when we were suddenly woke up. There were a dozen men in our room, one or two of them in some official costume. They spoke to us in Italian, and ordered us to dress ourselves. They were so numerous that resistance

was useless, so we obeyed; and an hour after we were both in prison, confined in the same cell. You may well imagine what our thoughts were. The corporal remarked to me, in that cool way of his: 'It will require four days to obtain our extradition, and three days to take us back to Montaignac—that's seven; then there'll be one day more to try us, so we've in all just eight days to live.' Bavois said that at least a hundred times during the first five or six days of our confinement, but five months passed by, and every night we went to bed expecting they'd come for us on the following morning. But they didn't come. We were kindly treated. They did not take away my money; and they willingly sold us various little luxuries. We were allowed two hours of exercise every day in the courtyard, and the keepers even lent us several books to read. In short, I shouldn't have had any particular cause for complaint if I had only been allowed to receive or to forward letters, or if I had been able to communicate with my father or Marie-Anne. But we were in the secret cells, and were not allowed to have any intercourse with the other prisoners. At length our detention seemed so strange and became so insupportable that we resolved to obtain some explanation of it at any cost. We changed our tactics. We had hitherto been quiet and submissive: but now we became as violent and unmanageable as possible. The whole prison resounded with our cries and protestations; we were continually sending for the superintendent, and claiming the intervention of the French ambassador. These proceedings at last had the desired effect. One fine afternoon the governor of the jail released us, not without expressing his regret at being deprived of the society of such amiable and charming guests. Our first act, as you may suppose, was to hasten to the ambassador. We didn't see that dignitary, but his secretary received us. He knit his brows when I told my story, and became excessively grave. I remember each word of his reply. 'Sir,' said he, 'I can assure you most positively that any proceedings instituted against you in France have had nothing whatever to do with your detention here.' And I expressed my astonishment frankly. 'One moment,' he added, 'I will give you my opinion. One of your enemies—I leave you to discover which—must exert a powerful influence in Turin. You were in his way, perhaps, and he had you imprisoned by the Piedmontese police."

Jean Lacheneur struck the table beside him with his clenched

fist. "Ah! the secretary was right!" he exclaimed. "Maurice, it was Martial de Sairmeuse who caused your arrest—"

"Or the Marquis de Courtornieu," interrupted the abbe with a warning glance at Jean.

In a moment Maurice's eyes gleamed brilliantly, then, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, he said: "Never mind; I don't wish to trouble myself any more about the past. My father is well again—that is the main thing. We can easily find some way of getting him safely across the frontier. And then Marie-Anne and I—we will tend him so devotedly that he will soon forget it was my rashness that almost cost him his life. He is so good, so indulgent for the faults of others. We will go and reside in Italy or Switzerland, and you shall accompany us, Monsieur le Abbe, and you as well, Jean. As for you, corporal, it's already decided that you belong to our family."

While Maurice spoke in this fashion, so hopefully, so confidently, Jean and the abbe, realizing the bitter truth, sought to avert their faces; but they could not conceal their agitation from young d'Escorval's searching glance. "What is the matter?" he asked with evident surprise.

They trembled, hung their heads, but did not say a word. Maurice's astonishment changed to a vague, inexpressible fear. He enumerated all the misfortunes which could possibly have befallen him.

"What has happened?" he asked in a husky voice. "My father is safe, is he not? You said that my mother would want nothing more if I were only by her side again. Is it Marie-Anne, then—" He hesitated.

"Courage, Maurice," murmured the abbe. "Courage!"

The young fellow tottered as if he were about to fall. He had turned intensely pale. "Marie-Anne is dead!" he exclaimed.

Jean and the abbe were silent.

"Dead!" repeated Maurice; "and no secret voice warned me! Dead! When?"

"She died only last night," replied Jean.

Maurice rose. "Last night?" said he. "In that case, then, she is still here. Where?—upstairs?" And without waiting for a reply he darted toward the staircase so quickly that neither Jean nor the abbe had time to intercept him. With three bounds he reached the room above; he walked straight to the bed, and with a firm hand turned back the sheet that hid his loved one's face. But at the same moment he recoiled with a heart-broken

cry. What! was this the beautiful, the radiant Marie-Anne—she whom he had loved so fervently! He did not recognize her. He could not recognize these distorted features—that swollen, discolored face—these eyes, now almost hidden by the purple swelling round them. When Jean and the priest entered the room they found him standing with his head thrown back, his eyes dilated with terror, his right arm rigidly extended toward the corpse. "Maurice," said the priest gently, "be calm. Courage!"

The young fellow turned with an expression of complete bewilderment upon his features. "Yes," he faltered; "that is what I need—courage!" He staggered as he spoke, and they were obliged to support him to an armchair.

"Be a man," continued the priest. "Where is your energy? To live is to suffer."

He listened, but did not seem to understand. "Live!" he murmured; "why should I live since she is dead?"

His eyes gleamed so strangely that the abbe was alarmed. "If he does not weep, he will most certainly lose his reason!" thought the priest. Then in a commanding voice he added aloud. "You have no right to despair; you owe a sacred duty to your child."

The same remembrance which had given Marie-Anne strength to hold even death itself at bay for a moment saved Maurice from the dangerous trance into which he was sinking. He shuddered as if he had received an electric shock, and springing from his chair, "That is true," he cried. "Take me to my child!"

"Not just now, Maurice; wait a little."

"Where is it? Tell me where it is."

"I can not; I do not know."

An expression of unspeakable anguish stole over Maurice's face, and in a broken voice he said: "What! you don't know? Did she not confide in you?"

"No. I suspected her secret. I alone—"

"You alone! Then the child is perhaps dead. Even if it is living, who can tell where it is?"

"We shall no doubt find a clue."

"You are right," faltered Maurice. "When Marie-Anne knew that her life was in danger, she could not have forgotten her little one. Those who cared for her in her last moments must have received some message for me. I must see those

who watched over her. Who were they?" The priest averted his face. "I asked you who was with her when she died," repeated Maurice in a sort of frenzy. And, as the abbe remained silent, a terrible light dawned on the young fellow's mind. He understood the cause of Marie-Anne's distorted features now. "She perished the victim of a crime!" he exclaimed. "Some monster killed her. If she died such a death, our child is lost forever! And it was I who recommended, who commanded the greatest precautions! Ah! we are all of us cursed!" He sank back in his chair, overwhelmed with sorrow and remorse, and with big tears rolling slowly down his cheeks.

"He is saved!" thought the abbe, whose heart bled at the sight of such intense sorrow.

Jean Lacheneur stood by the priest's side with gloom upon his face. Suddenly he drew the Abbe Midon toward one of the windows: "What is this about a child?" he inquired harshly.

The priest's face flushed. "You have heard," he answered laconically.

"Am I to understand that Marie-Anne was Maurice's mistress, and that she had a child by him? Is that the case? I won't, I can't, believe it! She whom I revered as a saint! What! you would have me believe that her eyes lied—her eyes so chaste, so pure? And he—Maurice—he whom I loved as a brother! So his friendship was only a cloak, which he assumed so as to rob us of our honor!" Jean hissed these words through his set teeth in such low tones that Maurice, absorbed in his agony of grief, did not overhear him. "But how did she conceal her shame?" he continued. "No one suspected it—absolutely no one. And what has she done with her child? Did the thought of disgrace frighten her? Did she follow the example of so many ruined and forsaken women? Did she murder her own child? Ah, if it be alive, I will find it, and in any case Maurice shall be punished for his perfidy as he deserves." He paused; the window was open, and the sound of galloping horses could be plainly heard approaching along the adjacent highway. Both Jean and the abbe leaned forward and looked out. Two horsemen were riding toward the Borderie—the first some ten yards in advance of the other. The former halted at the corner of the garden path, threw his reins to his follower—a groom—and then strode on foot toward the house. On recognizing this visitor, Jean bounded from the window with a yell. He clutched Maurice by the shoulders, and, shaking him vio-

lently, exclaimed: "Up! here comes Martial, Marie-Anne's murderer! Up! he is coming! He is at our mercy!"

Maurice sprang to his feet, infuriated; but the abbe darted to the door and intercepted both young fellows as they were about to leave the room. "Not a word! not a threat!" he said, imperiously. "I forbid it. At least respect the presence of death!" He spoke with such authority, and his glance was so commanding, that both Jean and Maurice involuntarily paused. Before the priest had time to add another word, Martial was there. He did not cross the threshold. One look and he realized the siutation. He turned very pale, but not a word escaped his lips. Wonderful as was his usual power of self-control he could not articulate a syllable; and it was only by pointing to the bed on which Marie-Anne's lifeless form was reposing that he asked for an explanation.

"She was infamously poisoned last evening," sadly replied the abbe.

Then Maurice, forgetting the priest's demands, stepped forward. "She was alone and defenseless," he said vehemently. "I have only been at liberty during the last two days. But I know the name of the man who had me arrested at Turin, and thrown into prison. They told me the coward's name! Yes, it was you, you infamous wretch! Ah! you dare not deny it; you confess your guilt, you scoundrel!"

Once again the abbe interposed; he threw himself between the rivals, fearing lest they should come to blows. But the Marquis de Sairmeuse had already resumed his usual haughty and indifferent manner. He took a bulky envelope from his pocket, and threw it on the table. "This," said he coldly, "is what I was bringing to Mademoiselle Lacheneur. It contains, first of all, royal letters of license from his majesty for the Baron d'Escorval, who is now at liberty to return to his old home. He is, in fact, free and saved, for he is granted a new trial, and there can be no doubt of his acquittal. In the same envelope you will also find a decree of non-complicity rendered in favor of the Abbe Midon, and an order from the bishop of the diocese reinstating him as cure of Sairmeuse; and, finally, Corporal Bavois's discharge from the service, drawn up in proper form, with the needful memorandum securing his right to a pension."

He paused, and as his hearers stood motionless with wonder, he turned and approached Marie-Anne's bedside. Then, with

his hand raised to heaven over the lifeless form of her whom he had loved, and in a voice that would have made the murderess tremble in her innermost soul, he solemnly exclaimed: "I swear to you, Marie-Anne, that I will avenge you!" For a few seconds he stood motionless, then suddenly he stooped, pressed a kiss on the dead girl's brow, and left the room.

"And you think that man can be guilty!" exclaimed the abbe. "You see, Jean, that you are mad!"

"And this last insult to my dead sister is an honor, I suppose?" said Jean, with a furious gesture.

"And the wretch binds my hands by saving my father!" exclaimed Maurice.

From his place by the window, the abbe saw Martial vault into the saddle. But the marquis did not take the road to Montaignac. It was toward the Chateau de Courtornieu that he now hastened.

XXXIV

BLANCHE'S reason had sustained a frightful shock, when Chupin was obliged to lift and carry her out of Marie-Anne's room. But she well-nigh lost consciousness altogether when she saw the old poacher struck down by her side. However, as will be remembered, Aunt Medea, at least, had some energy in her fright. She seized her bewildered niece's arm, and by dint of dragging and pushing had her back at the chateau in much less time than it had taken them to reach the Borderie. It was half-past one in the morning when they reached the little garden gate, by which they had left the grounds. No one in the chateau had noticed their long absence. This was due to several different circumstances. First of all, to the precautions which Blanche herself had taken in giving orders, before going out, that no one should come to her room, on any pretext whatever, unless she rang. Then it also chanced to be the birthday of the marquis s valet de chambre, and the servants had dined more sumptuously than usual. They had toasts and songs over their dessert; and at the finish of the

repast, they amused themselves with an improvised ball. They were still dancing when Blanche and her aunt returned. None of the doors had yet been secured for the night, and the pair succeeded in reaching Blanche's room without being observed. When the door had been securely closed, and there was no longer any fear of listeners, Aunt Medea attacked her niece.

"Now will you explain what happened at the Borderie; and what you were doing there?" she inquired, in a tone of unusual authority.

Blanche shuddered. "Why do you wish to know?" she asked.

"Because I suffered agony during the hours I was waiting for you in the garden. What was the meaning of those dreadful cries I heard? Why did you call for help? I heard a death-rattle that made my hair stand on end with terror. Why did Chupin have to bring you out in his arms?" She paused for a moment, and then finding that Blanche did not reply: "You don't answer me!" she exclaimed.

The young marquise was longing to annihilate her dependent relative, who might ruin her by a thoughtless word, and whom she would ever have beside her—a living memento of her crime. However, what should she say? Would it be better to reveal the truth, horrible as it was, or to invent some plausible explanation? If she confessed everything she would place herself at Aunt Medea's mercy. But, on the other hand, if she deceived her aunt, it was more than probable that the latter would betray her by some involuntary remark when she heard of the crime committed at the Borderie? Hence, under the circumstances, the wisest plan, perhaps, would be to speak out frankly, to teach her relative her lesson, and try and imbue her with some firmness. Having come to this conclusion, Blanche disdained all concealment. "Ah, well!" she said, "I was jealous of Marie-Anne. I thought she was Martial's mistress. I was half-crazed, and I poisoned her."

She expected a despairing cry, or even a fainting fit, but, to her surprise, Aunt Medea merely shed a few tears—such as she often wept for any trifle—and exclaimed: "How terrible. What if it should be discovered?" In point of fact, stupid as the neglected spinster might be, she had guessed the truth before she questioned her niece. And not merely was she prepared for some such answer, but the tyranny she had endured

for years had well-nigh destroyed all the real moral sensibility she had ever possessed.

On noting her aunt's comparative composure, Blanche breathed more freely. She never imagined that her impoverished relative was already meditating some sort of revenge for all the slights heaped on her in past years; but felt quite convinced that she could count on Aunt Medea's absolute silence and submission. With this idea in her head she began to relate all the circumstances of the frightful drama enacted at the Borderie. In so doing she yielded to a desire stronger than her own will: to the wild longing that often seizes the most hardened criminal, and forces—irresistibly impels him to talk of his crimes, even when he distrusts his confidant. But when she came to speak of the proofs which had convinced her of her lamentable mistake, she suddenly paused in dismay.

What had she done with the marriage certificate signed by the cure of Vigano, and which she remembered holding in her hands? She sprang up, and felt in the pocket of her dress. Ah, she had it safe. It was there. Without again unfolding it she threw it into a drawer, and turned the key.

Aunt Medea wished to retire to her own room, but Blanche entreated her to remain. She was unwilling to be left alone—she dared not—she was afraid. And as if she desired to silence the inward voice tormenting her, she talked on with extreme volubility, repeating again and again that she was ready to do anything in expiation of her crime, and vowing that she would overcome all impossibilities in her quest for Marie-Anne's child. The task was both a difficult and dangerous one, for an open search for the child would be equivalent to a confession of guilt. Hence, she must act secretly, and with great caution. "But I shall succeed," she said. "I will spare no expense." And remembering her vow, and her dying victim's threats, she added: "I must succeed. I swore to do so, and I was forgiven under those conditions."

In the mean while, Aunt Medea sat listening in astonishment. It was incomprehensible to her that her niece, with her dreadful crime still fresh in her mind, could coolly reason, deliberate, and make plans for the future. "What an iron will!" thought the dependent relative; but in her bewilderment she quite overlooked one or two circumstances that would have enlightened any ordinary observer.

Blanche was seated on her bed with her hair unbound; her

eyes were glistening with delirium, and her incoherent words and excited gestures betrayed the frightful anxiety that was torturing her. And she talked and talked, now narrating, and now questioning Aunt Medea, and forcing her to reply, only that she might escape from her own thoughts. Morning had already dawned, and the servants could be heard bustling about the chateau, while Blanche, oblivious of everything around her, was still explaining how, in less than a year, she could hope to restore Marie-Anne's child to Maurice d'Escorval. She paused abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Instinct had suddenly warned her of the danger she incurred in making the slightest change in her habits. Accordingly, she sent Aunt Medea away; then, at the usual hour, rang for her maid. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and she was just completing her toilet, when the ring of the outer bell announced a visitor. Almost immediately her maid, who had just previously left her, returned, evidently in a state of great excitement.

"What is the matter?" inquired Blanche, eagerly. "Who has come?"

"Ah, madame—that is, mademoiselle, if you only knew—"

"Will you speak?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse is downstairs in the blue drawing-room; and he begs mademoiselle to grant him a few minutes' conversation."

Had a thunderbolt riven the earth at her feet, the murderess could not have been more terrified. Her first thought was that everything had been discovered; for what else could have brought Martial there? She almost decided to send word that she was not at home, or that she was extremely ill, when reason told her that she was perhaps alarming herself needlessly, and that in any case the worst was preferable to suspense. "Tell the marquis that I will be with him in a moment," she at last replied.

She desired a few minutes solitude to compose her features, to regain her self-possession, if possible, and conquer the nervous trembling that made her shake like a leaf. But in the midst of her uneasiness a sudden inspiration brought a malicious smile to her lip. "Ah!" she thought, "my agitation will seem perfectly natural. It may even be of service." And yet, as she descended the grand staircase, she could not help saying to herself: "Martial's presence here is incomprehensible."

It was certainly very extraordinary; and he himself had not

come to Courtornieu without considerable hesitation. But it was the only means he had of procuring several important documents which were indispensable in the revision of M. d'Escorval's case. These documents, after the baron's condemnation, had been left in the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands. Now that the latter had gone out of his mind, it was impossible to ask him for them; and Martial was obliged to apply to his wife for permission to search for them among her father's papers. He had said to himself that morning: "I will carry the baron's letters of license to Marie-Anne, and then I will push on to Courtornieu."

He arrived at the Borderie gay and confident, his heart full of hope; and found that Marie-Anne was dead. The discovery had been a terrible blow for Martial; and his conscience told him that he was not free from blame; that he had, at least, facilitated the perpetration of the crime. For it was indeed he who, by an abuse of influence, had caused Maurice's arrest at Turin. But though he was capable of the basest perfidy when his love was at stake, he was incapable of virulent animosity. Marie-Anne was dead; he had it in his power to revoke the benefits he had conferred, but the thought of doing so never once occurred to him. And when Jean and Maurice upbraided him, his only revenge was to overwhelm them by his magnanimity. When he left the Borderie, pale as a ghost, his lips still cold from the kiss still printed on the dead girl's brow, he said to himself: "For her sake, I will go to Courtornieu. In memory of her, the baron must be saved."

By the expression of the servants' faces as he leaped from the saddle in the courtyard of the chateau and asked to see Madame Blanche, he was again reminded of the sensation which this unexpected visit would necessarily cause. However, he cared little for it. He was passing through a crisis in which the mind can conceive no further misfortune, and becomes indifferent to everything. Still he trembled slightly when they ushered him into the blue drawing-room. He remembered the room well, for it was here that Blanche had been wont to receive him in days gone by, when his fancy was wavering between her and Marie-Anne. How many pleasant hours they had passed together here! He seemed to see Blanche again, as she was then, radiant with youth, gay and smiling. Her manner was affected, perhaps, but still it had seemed charming at the time.

At this very moment, Blanche entered the room. She looked so sad and careworn that her husband scarcely knew her. His heart was touched by the look of patient sorrow seemingly stamped upon her features. "How much you must have suffered, Blanche," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said.

It cost her an effort to repress her secret joy. She at once realized that he knew nothing of her crime; and noting his emotion, she perceived the profit she might derive from it. "I can never cease to regret having displeased you," she replied, in a sad, humble voice. "I shall never be consoled."

She had touched the vulnerable spot in every man's heart. For there is no man so skeptical, so cold, or so heartless but his vanity is not flattered with the thought that a woman is dying for his sake. There is no man who is not moved by such a flattering idea; and who is not ready and willing to give, at least, a tender pity in exchange for such devotion.

"Is it possible that you could forgive me?" stammered Martial. The wily enchantress averted her face as if to prevent him from reading in her eyes a weakness of which she felt ashamed. This simple gesture was the most eloquent of answers. But Martial said no more on this subject. He asked for permission to inspect M. de Courtornieu's papers with the view of finding the documents he required for M. d'Escorval's case, and Blanche readily complied with his request. He then turned to take his leave, and fearing perhaps the consequences of too formal a promise he merely added: "Since you don't forbid it, Blanche, I will return—to-morrow—another day." However, as he rode back to Montaignac, his thoughts were busy. "She really loves me," he mused; "that pallor, that weariness could not be feigned. Poor girl! she is my wife, after all. The reasons that influenced me in my quarrel with her father exist no longer, for the Marquis de Courtornieu may be considered as dead."

All the inhabitants of Sairmeuse were congregated on the market-place when Martial rode through the village. They had just heard of the murder at the Borderie, and the abbe was now closeted with the magistrate, relating as far as he could the circumstances of the crime. After a prolonged inquiry, it was eventually reported that a man known as Chupin, a notoriously bad character, had entered the house of Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and taken advantage of her absence to mingle poison with her food; and the said Chupin had been

himself assassinated soon after his crime by a certain Balstain, whose whereabouts were unknown.

However, this affair soon interested the district far less than the constant visits which Martial was paying to Madame Blanche. Shortly afterward it was rumored that the Marquis and the Marquise de Sairmeuse were reconciled; and indeed a few weeks later, they left for Paris with an intention of residing there permanently. A day or two after their departure, the eldest of the Chupins also announced his determination of taking up his abode in the same great city. Some of his friends endeavored to dissuade him, assuring him that he would certainly die of starvation; but with singular assurance, he replied: "On the contrary, I have an idea that I shan't want for anything as long as I live there."

XXXV

TIME gradually heals all wounds; and its effacing fingers spare but few traces of events; which in their season may have absorbed the attention of many thousand minds. What remained to attest the reality of that fierce whirlwind of passion which had swept over the peaceful valley of the Oiselle? Only a charred ruin on La Reche, and a grave in the cemetery, on which was inscribed: "Marie-Anne Lacheneur, died at the age of twenty. Pray for her!" Recent as were the events of which that ruin and that gravestone seemed as it were the prologue and the epilogue, they were already relegated to the legendary past. The peasantry of Sairmeuse had other things to think about—the harvest, the weather, their sheep and cattle, and it was only a few old men, the politicians of the village, who at times turned their attention from agricultural incidents to remember the rising of Montaignac. Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, when they were gathered together at the local hostelry of the Bœuf Couronne, they would lay down their greasy cards and gravely discuss the events of the past year. And they never failed to remark that almost all the actors of that bloody drama at Montaignac had, in common parlance, "come

to a bad end." The victors and the vanquished seemed to encounter the same fate. Lacheneur had been beheaded; Chanlouineau, shot; Marie-Anne, poisoned; and Chupin, the traitor, the Duc de Sairmeuse's spy, stabbed to death. It was true that the Marquis de Courtornieu lived, or rather survived, but death would have seemed a mercy in comparison with such a total annihilation of intelligence. He had fallen below the level of a brute beast, which at least is endowed with instinct. Since his daughter's departure he had been ostensibly cared for by two servants, who did not allow him to give them much trouble, for whenever they wished to go out they complacently confined him, not in his room, but in the back cellar, so as to prevent his shrieks and ravings from being heard outside. If some folks supposed for a while that the Sairmeuses would escape the fate of the others, they were grievously mistaken, for it was not long before the curse fell upon them as well.

One fine December morning, the duke left the chateau to take part in a wolf-hunt in the neighborhood. At nightfall, his horse returned, panting, covered with foam, and riderless. What had become of his master? A search was instituted at once, and all night long a score of men, carrying torches, wandered through the woods, shouting and calling at the top of their voices. Five days went by, and the search for the missing man was almost abandoned, when a shepherd lad, pale with fear, came to the chateau to tell the steward that he had discovered the Duc de Sairmeuse's body—lying all bloody and mangled at the foot of a precipice. It seemed strange that so excellent a rider should have met with such a fate; and there might have been some doubt as to its being an accident, had it not been for the explanation given by several of his grace's grooms. "The duke was riding an exceedingly vicious beast," these men remarked. "She was always taking fright and shying at everything."

A few days after this occurrence Jean Lacheneur left the neighborhood. This singular fellow's conduct had caused considerable comment. When Marie-Anne died, although he was her natural heir, he at first refused to have anything to do with her property. "I don't want to take anything that came to her through Chanlouineau," he said to every one right and left, thus slandering his sister's memory, as he had slandered her when alive. Then, after a short absence from the district, and with-

out any apparent reason, he suddenly changed his mind. He not only accepted the property, but made all possible haste to obtain possession of it. He excused his past conduct as best he could; but if he was to be believed, instead of acting in his own interest, he was merely carrying his sister's wishes into effect, for he over and over again declared that whatever price her property might fetch not a sou of its value would go into his own pockets. This much is certain, as soon as he obtained legal possession of the estate, he sold it, troubling himself but little as to the price he received, provided the purchasers paid cash. However, he reserved the sumptuous furniture of the room on the upper floor of the Borderie and burnt it—from the bedstead to the curtains and the carpet—one evening in the little garden in front of the house. This singular act became the talk of the neighborhood, and the villagers universally opined that Jean had lost his head. Those who hesitated to agree with this opinion, expressed it a short time afterward, when it became known that Jean Lacheneur had engaged himself with a company of strolling players who stopped at Montaignac for a few days. The young fellow had both good advice and kind friends. M. d'Escorval and the abbe had exerted all their eloquence to induce him to return to Paris, and complete his studies; but in vain.

The priest and the baron no longer had to conceal themselves. Thanks to Martial de Sairmeuse, they were now installed, the former at the parsonage and the latter at Escorval, as in days gone by. Acquitted at his new trial, reinstalled in possession of his property, reminded of his frightful fall only by a slight limp, the baron would have deemed himself a fortunate man had it not been for his great anxiety on his son's account. Poor Maurice! The nails that secured Marie-Anne's coffin ere it was lowered into the sod seemed to have pierced his heart; and his very life now seemed dependent on the hope of finding his child. Relying already on the Abbe Midon's protection and assistance, he had confessed everything to his father, and had even confided his secret to Corporal Bavois, who was now an honored guest at Escorval; and all three had promised him their best assistance. But the task was a difficult one, and such chances of success as might have existed were greatly diminished by Maurice's determination that Marie-Anne's name should not be mentioned in prosecuting the search. In this he acted very differently to Jean. The latter slandered his mur-

dered sister right and left, while Maurice sedulously sought to prevent her memory being tarnished.

The Abbe Midon did not seek to turn Maurice from his idea. "We shall succeed all the same," he said kindly; "with time and patience any mystery can be solved." He divided the department into a certain number of districts; and one of the little band went day by day from house to house questioning the inmates, in the most cautious manner, for fear of arousing suspicion; for a peasant becomes intractable if his suspicions are but once aroused. However, weeks went by, and still the quest was fruitless. Maurice was losing all hope. "My child must have died on coming into the world," he said, again and again.

But the abbe reassured him. "I am morally certain that such was not the case," he replied. "By Marie-Anne's absence I can tell pretty nearly the date of her child's birth. I saw her after her recovery; she was comparatively gay and smiling. Draw your own conclusions."

"And yet there isn't a nook or corner for miles round which we haven't explored."

"True; but we must extend the circle of our investigations."

The priest was now only striving to gain time, which, as he knew full well, is the sovereign balm for sorrow. His confidence had been very great at first, but it had sensibly diminished since he had questioned an old woman, who had the reputation of being one of the greatest gossips of the community. On being skilfully catechised by the abbe, this worthy dame replied that she knew nothing of such a child, but that there must be one in the neighborhood, as this was the third time she had been questioned on the subject. Intense as was his surprise, the abbe succeeded in concealing it. He set the old gossip talking, and after two hours' conversation, he arrived at the conclusion that two persons in addition to Maurice were searching for Marie-Anne's child. Who these persons were, and what their aim was, were points which the abbe failed to elucidate. "Ah," thought he, "after all, rascals have their use on earth. If we only had a man like Chupin to set on the trail!"

The old poacher was dead, however, and his eldest son—the one who knew Blanche's secret—was in Paris. Only the widow and the second son remained at Sairmeuse. They had not, as yet, succeeded in discovering the twenty thousand francs, but

the fever for gold was still burning in their veins, and they persisted in their search. From morn till night the mother and son toiled on, until the earth round their hut had been fully explored to the depth of six feet. However, a peasant passed by one day and made a remark which suddenly caused them to abandon their search. "Really, my boy," he said, addressing young Chupin, "I didn't think you were such a fool as to persist in bird's-nesting after the chick was hatched and had flown. Your brother in Paris can no doubt tell you where the treasure was concealed."

"Holy Virgin! you're right!" cried the younger Chupin. "Wait till I get money enough to take me to Paris, and we'll see."

XXXVI

MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE'S unexpected visit to the Chateau de Courtornieu had alarmed Aunt Medea even more than it had alarmed Blanche. In five minutes, more ideas passed through the dependent relative's mind than during the last five years. In fancy she already saw the gendarmes at the chateau; her niece arrested, confined in the Montaignac prison, and brought before the Assize Court. She might herself remain quiet if that were all there was to fear! But suppose she was compromised, suspected of complicity as well, dragged before the judges, and even accused of being the only culprit! At this thought her anxiety reached a climax, and finding the suspense intolerable, she ventured downstairs. She stole on tiptoe into the great ballroom, and applying her ear to the keyhole of the door leading into the blue salon, she listened attentively to Blanche and Martial's conversation. What she heard convinced her that her fears were groundless. She drew a long breath, as if a mighty burden had been lifted from her breast. But a new idea, which was to grow, flourish, and bear fruit, had just taken root in her mind. When Martial left the room, she at once opened the door by which she was standing, and entered the

blue reception-room, thus admitting as it were that she had been a listener. Twenty-four hours earlier she would not even have dreamed of committing such an audacious act. "Well," she exclaimed, "Blanche, we were frightened for nothing."

Blanche did not reply. The young marquise was weighing in her mind the probable consequences of all these events which had succeeded each other with such marvelous rapidity. "Perhaps the hour of my revenge is nigh," she murmured, as if communing with herself.

"What do you say?" inquired Aunt Medea, with evident curiosity.

"I say, aunt, that in less than a month I shall be the Marquese de Sairmeuse in reality as well as in name. My husband will return to me, and then—oh! then."

"God grant it!" said Aunt Medea, hypocritically. In her secret heart she had but scant faith in this prediction, and cared very little whether it was realized or not. However, in that low tone which accomplices habitually employ, she ventured to add: "If what you say proves true, it will only be another proof that your jealousy led you astray; and that—that what you did at the Borderie was a perfectly unnecessary act."

Such had indeed been Blanche's opinion; but now she shook her head, and gloomily replied: "You are wrong; what took place at the Borderie has brought my husband back to me again. I understand everything now. It is true that Marie-Anne was not his mistress; but he loved her. He loved her, and her repulses only increased his passion. It was for her sake that he abandoned me; and while she lived he would never have thought of me. His emotion on seeing me was the remnant of an emotion which she had awakened. His tenderness was only the expression of his grief. Whatever happens, I shall only have her leavings—the leavings of what she disdained!" The young marquise spoke bitterly, her eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot as she added: "So I shan't regret what I have done! no, never—never!" As she spoke she felt herself again brave and determined.

But the horrible fears assailed her when the inquiry into the circumstances of the murder commenced. Officials had been sent from Montaignac to investigate the affair. They examined a host of witnesses, and there was even some talk of

sending to Paris for one of those detectives skilled in unraveling all the mysteries of crime. This prospect quite terrified Aunt Medea; and her fear was so apparent that it caused Blanche great anxiety. "You will end by betraying us," she remarked, one evening.

"Ah! I can't control my fears."

"If that is the case, don't leave your room."

"It would be more prudent, certainly."

"You can say you are not well; your meals shall be served you upstairs."

Aunt Medea's face brightened. In her heart, she was delighted. It had long been her dream and ambition to have her meals served in her own room, in bed in the morning and on a little table by the fire in the evening; but as yet she had never been able to realize this fancy. On two or three occasions, feeling slightly indisposed, she had asked to have her breakfast brought to her room, but her request had each time been harshly refused. "If Aunt Medea is hungry, she will come downstairs, and take her place at the table as usual," had been Blanche's imperious reply.

It was hard, indeed, to be treated in this way in a chateau where there were always a dozen servants idling about. But now, in obedience to the young marquise's formal orders, the head cook himself came up every morning into Aunt Medea's room, to receive her instructions; and she was at perfect liberty to dictate each day's bill of fare, and to order the particular dishes she preferred. This change in the dependent relative's situation awakened many strange thoughts in her mind, and stifled such regret as she had felt for the crime at the Borderie. Still both she and her niece followed the inquiry which had been set on foot with a keen interest. They obtained all the latest information concerning the investigation through the butler of the chateau, who seemed much interested in the case, and who had won the good-will of the Montaignac police agents, by making them familiar with the contents of his wine cellar. It was from this major-domo that Blanche and her aunt learned that all suspicions pointed to the deceased Chupin, who had been seen prowling round about the Borderie on the very night the crime was committed. This testimony was given by the same young peasant who had warned Jean Lacheneur of the old poacher's doings. As regards the motive of the crime, fully a score of persons

had heard Chupin declare that he should never enjoy any peace of mind as long as a single Lacheneur was left on earth. So thus it happened that the very incidents which might have ruined Blanche, saved her; and she really came to consider the old poacher's death as a providential occurrence, for she at least had no reason to suspect that he had revealed her secret before expiring. When the butler told her that the magistrate and police agents had returned to Montaignac, she could scarcely conceal her joy; and drawing a long breath of relief, she turned toward Aunt Medea with the remark: "Ah, now there's nothing more to be feared."

She had, indeed, escaped the justice of man; but the justice of God remained. A few weeks previously the thought of divine retribution would perhaps have made Blanche smile, for she then considered the punishment of Providence as an imaginary evil, invented to hold timorous minds in check. On the morning that followed her crime, and after her long random talk with Aunt Medea, she almost shrugged her shoulders at the thought of Marie-Anne's dying threats. She remembered her promise; and yet, despite all she had said, she did not intend to fulfil it. After careful consideration, she had come to the conclusion that in trying to find the missing child she would expose herself to terrible risks; and on the other hand she felt certain that the child's father would discover it. So she dismissed the matter from her mind, and chiefly busied herself with what Martial had said during his visit, and the prospect that presented itself of a reconciliation.

But she was destined to realize the power of her victim's threats that same night. Worn out with fatigue, she retired to her own room at an early hour, and jumped into bed, exclaiming; "I must sleep!" But sleep had fled. Her crime was ever in her thoughts; and rose before her in all its horror and atrocity. She knew that she was lying on her bed, at Courtornieu; and yet it seemed as if she were still in Chanlouineau's house, first pouring out the poison, and then watching its effects, while concealed in the dressing-room. She was struggling against the idea; exerting all her strength of will to drive away these terrible memories, when she imagined she heard the key turn in the lock. Raising her head from the pillow with a start, she fancied she could perceive the door open noiselessly, and then Marie-Anne glided into the room like a fantom. She seated herself in an armchair near the

bed, and while the tears rolled down her cheeks, she looked sadly yet threateningly around her. The murderess hid her face under the counterpane. She shivered with terror, and a cold sweat escaped from every pore in her skin. For this seemed no mere apparition, but the frightful reality itself. Blanche did not submit to these tortures without resisting. Making a vigorous effort, she tried to reason with herself aloud, as if the sound of her voice would reassure her. "I am dreaming!" she said. "The dead don't return to life. To think that I'm childish enough to be frightened at fantoms which only exist in my own imagination."

She said this, but the vision did not fade. When she shut her eyes the fantom still faced her—even through her closed eyelids, and through the coverlids drawn up over her face. Say what she would, she did not succeed in sleeping till daybreak. And, worst of all, night after night, the same vision haunted her, reviving the terror which she forgot during the daytime in the broad sunlight. For she would regain her courage and become skeptical again as soon as the morning broke. "How foolish it is to be afraid of something that does not exist!" she would remark, railing at herself. "To-night I will conquer this absurd weakness." But when evening came all her resolution vanished, and scarcely had she retired to her room than the same fears seized hold of her, and the same fantom rose before her eyes. She fancied that her nocturnal agonies would cease when the investigation anent the murder was over—that she would forget both her crime and promise; but the inquiry finished, and yet the same vision haunted her, and she did not forget. Darwin has remarked that it is when their safety is assured that great criminals really feel remorse, and Blanche might have vouched for the truth of this assertion, made by the deepest thinker and closest observer of the age.

And yet her sufferings, atrocious as they were, did not induce her for one moment to abandon the plan she had formed on the occasion of Martial's visit. She played her part so well that, moved with pity, if not with love, he returned to see her frequently, and at last, one day, besought her to allow him to remain. But even this triumph did not restore her peace of mind. For between her and her husband rose the dreadful vision of Marie-Anne's distorted features. She knew only too well that Martial had no love to give her, and that

she would never have the slightest influence over him. And to crown her already intolerable sufferings came an incident which filled her with dismay. Alluding one evening to Marie-Anne's death, Martial forgot himself, and spoke of his oath of vengeance. He deeply regretted that Chupin was dead, he said, for he should have experienced an intense delight in making the wretch who murdered her die a lingering death in the midst of the most frightful tortures. As he spoke his voice vibrated with still powerful passion, and Blanche, in terror asked herself what would be her fate if her husband ever discovered that she was the culprit—and he might discover it. Now it was that she began to regret she had not kept her promise; and she resolved to commence the search for Marie-Anne's child. But to do this effectually it was essential she should be in a large city—in Paris, for instance—where she could procure discreet and skilful agents. Thus it was necessary to persuade Martial to remove to the capital. But with the Duc de Sairmeuse's assistance she did not find this a very difficult task; and one morning, with a radiant face, she informed Aunt Medea that she and her husband would leave Courtornieu at the end of the coming week.

In the midst of her anxiety, Blanche had failed to notice that Aunt Medea was no longer the same. The change in the dependent relative's tone and manner had, it is true, been a gradual one; it had not struck the servants, but it was none the less positive and real, and now it showed itself continually. For instance, the ofttime tyrannized-over chaperon no longer trembled when any one spoke to her, as formerly had been her wont, and there was occasionally a decided ring of independence in her voice. If visitors were present, she had been used to remain modestly in the background, but now she drew her chair forward, and unhesitatingly took part in the conversation. At table, she gave free expression to her preferences and dislikes; and on two or three occasions she had ventured to differ from her niece in opinion, and had even been so bold as to question the propriety of some of her orders. One day, moreover, when Blanche was going out, she asked Aunt Medea to accompany her; but the latter declared she had a cold, and remained at home. And, on the following Sunday, although Blanche did not wish to attend vespers, Aunt Medea declared her intention of going; and as it rained she requested the coachman to harness the horses to the car-

riage, which was done. All these little incidents could have been nothing separately, but taken together they plainly showed that the once humble chaperon's character had changed. When her niece announced that she and Martial were about to leave the neighborhood, Aunt Medea was greatly surprised, for the project had never been discussed in her presence. "What! you are going away," she repeated; "you are leaving Courtornieu?"

"And without regret."

"And where are you going to, pray?"

"To Paris. We shall reside there permanently; that's decided. The capital's the proper place for my husband, and, with his name, fortune, talents and the king's favor, he will secure a high position there. He will repurchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and furnish it magnificently, so that we shall have a princely establishment."

Aunt Medea's expression plainly indicated that she was suffering all the torments of envy. "And what is to become of me?" she asked, in plaintive tones.

"You—aunt! You will remain here; you will be mistress of the chateau. A trustworthy person must remain to watch over my poor father. You will be happy and contented here, I hope."

But no; Aunt Medea did not seem satisfied. "I shall never have courage to stay all alone in this great chateau," she whined.

"You foolish woman! won't you have the servants, the gardeners, and the concierge to protect you?"

"That makes no difference. I am afraid of insane people. When the marquis began to rave and howl this evening, I felt as if I should go mad myself."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "What *do* you wish then?" she asked sarcastically.

"I thought—I wondered—if you wouldn't take me with you."

"To Paris! You are crazy, I do believe. What would you do there?"

"Blanche, I entreat you, I beseech you, to do so!"

"Impossible, aunt, impossible!"

Aunt Medea seemed to be in despair. "And what if I told you that I can't remain here—that I dare not—that I should die!"

Blanche flushed with impatience. "You weary me beyond

endurance," she said roughly. And with a gesture that increased the harshness of her words, she added: "If Courtornieu displeases you so much, there is nothing to prevent you from seeking a home more to your taste. You are free and of age."

Aunt Medea turned very pale, and bit her lips. "That is to say," she said at last, "that you allow me to take my choice between dying of fear at Courtornieu and ending my days in a hospital. Thanks, my niece, thanks. That is like you. I expected nothing less from you. Thanks!" She raised her head, and her once humble eyes gleamed in a threatening fashion. "Very well! this decides me," she continued. "I entreated you, and you brutally refused my request, so now I command you and I say, 'I will go!' Yes, I intend to go with you to Paris—and I shall go. Ah! so it surprises you to hear poor, meek, much-abused Aunt Medea speak like this; but I've endured a great deal in silence for a long time, and now I rebel. My life in this house has been like life in hell. It is true you've given me shelter—fed and lodged me, but you've taken my entire life in exchange. What servant ever endured what I've had to endure? Have you ever treated one of your maids as you have treated me—your own flesh and blood? And I have had no wages; on the contrary, I was expected to be grateful since I lived by your tolerance. Ah, you have made me pay dearly for the crime of being poor. How you have insulted me—humiliated me—trampled me under foot!"

The rebellious chaperon paused again. The bitter rancor which had been accumulating in her heart for years fairly choked her; but after a moment she resumed in a tone of irony: "You ask me what *I* should do in Paris? I should enjoy myself, like you. You will go to court, to the play—into society, won't you? Very well, I will accompany you. I will attend these fêtes. I will have handsome toilets, too. I have rarely seen myself in anything but shabby black woolen dresses. Have you ever thought of giving me the pleasure of possessing a handsome dress? Twice a year, perhaps, you have given me a black silk, recommending me to take good care of it. But it was not for my sake that you went to this expense. It was for your own sake, and in order that your poor relation should do honor to your generosity. You dressed me in it, like you put your lackeys in livery, through vanity. And I endured all this; I made myself insignificant and humble; and when I was buffeted on one cheek, I offered the other. For after all

I must live—I must have food. And you, Blanche, how often you have said to me so that I might do your bidding, 'You must obey me if you wish to remain at Courtornieu!' And I obeyed you—I was forced to obey, as I didn't know where else to go. Ah! you have abused my poverty in every way; but now my turn has come!"

Blanche was so amazed that she could scarcely articulate a syllable, and it was in a scarcely audible voice that at last she faltered: "I don't understand you, aunt; I don't understand you."

The poor dependent shrugged her shoulders as her niece had done a few moments before. "In that case," said she slowly, "I may as well tell you, that since you have made me your accomplice against my will, we must share everything in common. I share the danger; so I will share the pleasure. Suppose everything should be discovered? Do you ever think of that? Yes, I've no doubt you do, and that's why you are seeking diversion. Very well! I desire diversion also, so I shall go to Paris with you."

With a desperate effort Blanche managed to regain some degree of self-possession. "And if I still said no?" she coldly queried.

"But you won't say no."

"And why not, if you please?"

"Because—"

"Will you go to the authorities and denounce me?"

Aunt Medea shook her head. "I am not such a fool," she retorted. "I should only compromise myself. No. I shouldn't do that; but I might, perhaps, tell your husband what happened at the Borderie."

Blanche shuddered. No other threat could have had such influence over her. "You shall accompany us, aunt," said she; "I promise it." And then in a gentle voice she added: "But it's quite unnecessary to threaten me. You have been cruel, aunt, and at the same time unjust. If you have been unhappy in our house, you have only yourself to blame. Why haven't you ever said anything? I attributed your complaisance to your affection for me. How was I to know that a woman so quiet and modest as yourself longed for fine dresses. Confess that it was impossible. Had I known— But rest easy, aunt, I will atone for my neglect." And as Aunt Medea, having obtained all she desired, stammered an excuse, "Non-

sense!" rejoined Blanche; "let us forget this foolish quarrel. You forgive me, don't you?" And the two ladies embraced each other with the greatest effusion, like two friends united after a misunderstanding.

Neither of them, however, was in the least degree deceived by this mock reconciliation. "It will be best for me to keep on the alert," thought the dependent relative. "God only knows with what joy my dear niece would send me to join Marie-Anne."

Perhaps a similar thought flitted through Blanche's mind. "I'm bound to this dangerous, perfidious creature forever now," she reflected. "I'm no longer my own mistress; I belong to her. When she commands me, I must obey, no matter what may be her fancy—and she has forty years' humiliation and servitude to avenge." The prospect of such a life made the young marquise tremble; and she racked her brain to discover some way of freeing herself from such intolerable thraldom. Would it be possible to induce Aunt Medea to live independently in her own house, served by her own servants? Might she succeed in persuading this silly old woman, who still longed for finery, to marry? A handsome marriage portion will always attract a husband. However, in either case, Blanche would require money—a large sum of money, which no one must be in a position to claim an account of. With this idea she took possession of over two hundred and fifty thousand francs, in bank-notes and coin, belonging to her father, and put away in one of his private drawers. This sum represented the Marquis de Courtornieu's savings during the past three years. No one knew he had laid it aside, except his daughter; and now that he had lost his reason, Blanche could take it for her own use without the slightest danger. "With this," thought she, "I can enrich Aunt Medea whenever I please without having recourse to Martial."

After these incidents there was a constant exchange of delicate attentions and fulsome affection between the two ladies. It was "my dearest little aunt," and "my dearly beloved niece," from morning until night; and the gossips of the neighborhood, who had often commented on the haughty disdain with which Blanche treated her relative, would have found abundant food for comment had they known that during the journey to Paris Aunt Medea was protected from the possibility of cold by a mantle lined with costly fur, exactly like the marquise's own, and that instead of traveling in the cumbersome berlin with

the servants, she had a seat in the postchaise with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and his wife.

Before their departure Martial had noticed the great change which had come over Aunt Medea and the many attentions which his wife lavished on her, and one day, when he was alone with Blanche, he exclaimed in a tone of good-natured raillery: "What's the meaning of all this attachment? We shall finish by encasing this precious aunt in cotton, shan't we?"

Blanche trembled and flushed. "I love good Aunt Medea so much!" said she. "I never can forget all the affection and devotion she lavished on me when I was so unhappy."

It was such a plausible explanation that Martial took no further notice of the matter; and, indeed, just then his mind was fully occupied. The agent he had despatched to Paris in advance, to purchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, if it were possible, had written asking the marquis to hasten his journey, as there was some difficulty about concluding the bargain. "Plague take the fellow!" angrily said Martial on receiving this news. "He is quite stupid enough to let this opportunity, which we've been waiting for during the last ten years, slip through his fingers. I shan't find any pleasure in Paris if I can't own our old residence."

He was so impatient to reach the capital that, on the second day of their journey, he declared that if he were alone he would travel all night. "Do so now," said Blanche graciously; "I don't feel the least tired, and a night of travel does not frighten me." So they journeyed on without stopping, and the next morning at about nine o'clock they alighted at the Hotel Meurice.

Martial scarcely took time to eat his breakfast. "I must go and see my agent at once," he said as he hurried off. "I will soon be back." Two hours afterward he reappeared with a radiant face. "My agent was a simpleton," he exclaimed. "He was afraid to write me word that a man, on whom the conclusion of the sale depends, requires a bonus of fifty thousand francs. He shall have it and welcome." Then, in a tone of gallantry, habitual to him whenever he addressed his wife, he added: "It only remains for me to sign the papers, but I won't do so unless the house suits you. If you are not too tired, I would like you to visit it at once. Time presses, and we have many competitors."

This visit was, of course, one of pure form; but Blanche would have been hard to please if she had not been satisfied

with this mansion, then one of the most magnificent in Paris, with a monumental entrance facing the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain and large umbrageous gardens, extending to the Rue de Varennes. Unfortunately, this superb dwelling had not been occupied for several years, and required considerable repair. "It will take at least six months to restore everything," said Martial, "perhaps more; though in three months, possibly, a portion of it might be arranged very comfortably."

"It would be living in one's own house, at least," observed Blanche, divining her husband's wishes.

"Ah! then you agree with me! In that case, you may rest assured that I will expedite matters as swiftly as possible."

In spite, or rather by reason of his immense fortune, the Marquis de Sairmeuse knew that one is never so well, nor so quickly, served as when one serves one's self, and so he resolved to take the matter into his own hands. He conferred with the architect, interviewed the contractors, and hurried on the workmen. As soon as he was up in the morning he started out without waiting for breakfast, and seldom returned before dinner. Although Blanche was compelled to pass most of her time indoors, on account of the bad weather, she was not inclined to complain. Her journey, the unaccustomed sights and sounds of Paris, the novelty of life in a hotel, all combined to divert her thoughts from herself. She forgot her fears, a sort of haze enveloped the terrible scene at the Borderie, and the clamors of conscience were sinking into faint whispers. Indeed the past seemed fading away, and she was beginning to entertain hopes of a new and better life, when one day a servant knocked at the door and said: "There is a man downstairs who wishes to speak with madame."

XXXVII

BLANCHE was reclining on a sofa listening to a new book which Aunt Medea was reading aloud, and she did not even raise her head as the servant delivered his message. "A man?" she said carelessly; "what man?" She was expecting no one;

it must be one of the assistants or overseers employed by Martial.

"I can't inform madame who he is," replied the servant. "He is quite young; he is dressed like a peasant, and is, perhaps, seeking a place."

"It is probably the marquis he wishes to see."

"Madame will excuse me, but he particularly said that he wished to speak with her."

"Ask his name and business then. Go on, aunt," she added; "we have been interrupted in the most interesting part."

But Aunt Medea had not time to finish the page before the servant returned. "The man says madame will understand his business when she hears his name."

"And his name?"

"Chupin."

It seemed as if a bombshell had burst into the room. Aunt Medea dropped her book with a shriek, and sank back, half fainting in her chair. Blanche sprang up with a face as colorless as her white cashmere morning dress, her eyes dazed, and her lips trembling. "Chupin," she repeated, as if she almost hoped the servant would tell her she had not understood him correctly; "Chupin!" Then, angrily, she added: "Tell this man I won't see him, I won't see him, do you hear?" But before the servant had time to bow and retire, the young marquise changed her mind. "One moment," said she; "on reflection I think I will see him. Bring him up."

The servant then withdrew, and the two ladies looked at each other in silent consternation. "It must be one of Chupin's sons," faltered Blanche at last.

"No doubt; but what does he desire."

"Money, probably."

Aunt Medea raised her eyes to heaven. "God grant that he knows nothing of your meetings with his father!" said she.

"You are not going to despair in advance, are you, aunt? We shall know everything in a few minutes. Pray remain calm. Turn your back to us; look out of the window into the street and don't let him see your face."

Blanche was not deceived. This unexpected visitor was indeed Chupin's eldest son; the one to whom the dying poacher had confided his secret. Since his arrival in Paris, the young fellow had been running in every direction, inquiring everywhere and of everybody for the Marquis de Sairmeuse's address.

At last he obtained it; and he lost no time in presenting himself at the Hotel Meurice. He was now awaiting the result of his application at the entrance downstairs, where he stood whistling, with his hands in his pockets, when the servant returned and bade him follow. Chupin obeyed; but the servant, who was on fire with curiosity, loitered by the way in hope of obtaining from this country youth some explanation of the surprise, not to say fright, with which Madame de Sairmeuse had greeted the mention of his name. "I don't say it to flatter you, my boy," he remarked, "but your name produced a great effect on madame." The prudent peasant carefully concealed the joy he felt on receiving this information. "How does she happen to know you?" continued the servant. "Are you both from the same place?"

"I am her foster-brother."

The servant did not believe this reply for a moment, and as they had now reached the marquise's apartment, he opened the door and ushered Chupin into the room. The latter had prepared a little story beforehand, but he was so dazzled by the magnificence around him that for a moment he stood motionless with staring eyes and gaping mouth. His wonder was increased by a large mirror opposite the door, in which he could survey himself from head to foot, and by the beautiful flowers on the carpet, which he feared to crush with his heavy boots.

After a moment, Blanche decided to break the silence. "What do you want of me?" she asked.

In a rambling fashion young Chupin then explained that he had been obliged to leave Sairmeuse on account of the numerous enemies he had there, that he had been unable to find his father's hidden treasure, and that he was consequently without resources.

"That'll do," interrupted Blanche, and then in far from a friendly manner, she remarked: "I don't at all understand why you should apply to me. You and all the rest of your family have anything but an enviable reputation at Sairmeuse; still, as you are from that part of the country, I am willing to aid you a little on condition you don't apply to me again."

Chupin listened to this homily with a half cringing, half impudent air; but when Blanche had finished he raised his head, and proudly said: "I don't ask for alms."

"What do ask for, then?"

"My dues"

Blanche's heart sank, and yet she had courage enough to glance disdainfully at Chupin, and reply: "What! do I owe you anything?"

"You don't owe me anything personally, madame; but you owe a heavy debt to my deceased father. Whose service did he perish in? Poor old man! he loved you devotedly. His last words were about you. 'A terrible thing has just happened at the Borderie, my boy,' said he. 'The young marquise hated Marie-Anne, and she has poisoned her. If it hadn't been for me she would have been lost. I am about to die, so let the whole blame rest on me; for it won't hurt me when I'm under the sod, and it will save the young lady. And by and by she will reward you; so that as long as you keep the secret you will want for nothing.'" Great as was young Chupin's impudence he paused abruptly, amazed by the air of perfect composure with which Blanche listened to him. In face of such wonderful dissimulation he almost doubted the truth of his father's story.

The marquise's self-possession was indeed surprising. She felt that if she once yielded she would always be at this wretch's mercy, as she already was at Aunt Medea's. "In other words," said she calmly, "you accuse me of having murdered Mademoiselle Lacheneur; and you threaten to denounce me if I don't yield to your demands." Chupin nodded his head in acquiescence. "Very well!" added Blanche, "since that's the case, you may go."

It seemed, indeed, that by audacity she might win this dangerous game on which her future peace depended. Chupin, greatly abashed, was standing before her undecided what course to pursue, when Aunt Medea, who was listening by the window, turned in affright, exclaiming: "Blanche! your husband—Martial! He is coming!"

The game was lost. Blanche fancied her husband entering and finding Chupin there, conversing with him, and so discovering everything! Her brain whirled; she yielded. Hastily thrusting her purse into Chupin's hand, she dragged him through an inner door to the servants' staircase. "Take this," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I will see you again. And not a word—not a word to my husband, remember!"

She had been wise to yield in time. When she returned to the drawing-room she found Martial there. He was gazing on the ground, and held an open letter in his hand. But he raised

his head when his wife entered the room, and she could detect signs of great emotion in his features. "What has happened?" she faltered.

Martial did not remark her troubled manner. "My father is dead, Blanche," he replied.

"The Duc de Sairmeuse! Good heavens! how did it happen?"

"He was thrown from his horse in the forest near the Sanguille rocks."

"Ah! it was there where my poor father was nearly murdered."

"Yes, the very place."

There was a moment's silence. Martial's affection for his father had not been very deep, and he was well aware that the duke had but little love for him. Hence he was astonished at the bitter grief he felt on hearing of his death. "From this letter, which was forwarded by a messenger from Sairmeuse," he continued, "I gather that everybody believes it to have been an accident; but I—I—"

"Well?"

"I believe he was murdered."

An exclamation of horror escaped Aunt Medea, and Blanche turned pale. "Murder!" she whispered.

"Yes, Blanche; and I could name the murderer. Oh! I am not deceived. My father's murderer is the same man who tried to kill the Marquis de Courtornieu—"

"Jean Lacheneur!"

Martial gravely bowed his head. It was his only reply.

"And will you not denounce him? Will you not demand justice?"

Martial's face grew gloomy. "What good would it do?" he replied. "I have no material proofs to furnish, and justice requires unimpeachable evidence." Then, as if communing with his own thoughts, rather than addressing his wife, he added, despondingly: "The Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu have reaped what they sowed. The blood of murdered innocence always calls for vengeance. Sooner or later the guilty must expiate their crimes."

Blanche shuddered. Each word found an echo in her own soul. Had her husband intended his words for her, he would scarcely have expressed himself differently. "Martial," said she, trying to arouse him from his gloomy reverie; "Martial!"

But he did not seem to hear her, and it was in the same tone

that he continued: "These Lacheneurs were happy and honored before our arrival at Sairmeuse. Their conduct was above all praise; their probity amounted to heroism. We might have made them our faithful and devoted friends. It was our duty, as well as our interest, to have done so. But we did not understand it; we humiliated, ruined, exasperated them. It was a fault for which we must atone. Who knows but what in Jean Lacheneur's place I should have done exactly what he has done?" He was again silent for a moment; then, with one of those sudden inspirations that sometimes enable one almost to read the future, he resumed: "I know Jean Lacheneur. I can fathom his hatred, and I know that he lives only in the hope of vengeance. It is true that we are very high and he is very low, but that matters little. We have everything to fear. Our millions form a rampart around us, but he will know how to open a breach. And no precautions will save us. At the very moment when we feel ourselves secure, he will be ready to strike. What he will attempt, I don't know; but his will be a terrible revenge. Remember my words, Blanche, if ruin ever overtakes our house, it will be Jean Lacheneur's work."

Aunt Medea and her niece were too horror-stricken to articulate a word, and for five minutes no sound broke the stillness save Martial's monotonous tread, as he paced up and down the room. At last he paused before his wife. "I have just ordered post-horses," he said. "You will excuse me for leaving you here alone. I must go to Sairmeuse at once, but I shall not be absent more than a week."

He left Paris a few hours later, and Blanche became a prey to the most intolerable anxiety. She suffered more than she had done during the days that immediately followed her crime. It was not against fantoms that she had to shield herself now; Chupin existed, and his voice, even if it were not as terrible as the voice of conscience, might make itself heard at any moment. If she had known where to find him, she would have gone to him, and endeavored, by the payment of a large sum of money, to persuade him to leave France. But he had left the hotel without giving her his address. Then again Martial's gloomy apprehensions combined to increase her fears, and the mere thought of Jean Lacheneur made her shrink with terror. She could not rid herself of the idea that Jean suspected her guilt, and was watching her, waiting for revenge. Her wish

to find Marie-Anne's child now became stronger than ever; it seemed to her that the abandoned infant might be a protection to her some day. However, where could she find an agent in whom she could confide? At last she remembered that she had heard her father speak of a detective named Chefteux as an exceedingly shrewd fellow, capable of anything, even of honesty if he were well paid. This man was really a perfect scoundrel, one of Fouche's vilest instruments, who had served and betrayed all parties, and who, at last, after the most barefaced perjury, had been dismissed from the police force. He had then established a private inquiry office, and after some little search Blanche ascertained that he lived in the Place Dauphine. One morning, taking advantage of her husband's absence, she donned her simplest dress, and, accompanied by Aunt Medea, repaired to Chefteux's residence. He proved to be a middle-aged man of medium height and inoffensive mien, and he cleverly affected an air of good humor. He ushered his client into a neatly furnished drawing-room, and Blanche at once told him that she was a married woman; that she lived with her husband in the Rue St. Denis; and that one of her sisters who had lately died had been led astray by a man who had disappeared. A child was living, however, whom she was very anxious to find. In short, she narrated an elaborate story which she had prepared in advance, and which, after all, sounded very plausible. Chefteux, however, did not believe a word of it; for as soon as it was finished he tapped Blanche familiarly on the shoulder, and remarked: "In short, my dear, we had our little escapades before our marriage."

Blanche shrank back as if some venomous reptile had touched her. To be treated in this fashion! she—a Courtornieu, now Duchess de Sairmeuse! "I think you are laboring under a wrong impression," she haughtily replied.

He made haste to apologize; but while listening to the further details he asked for, he could not help remarking to himself: "What eyes! what a voice!—they can't belong to a denizen of the Rue Saint-Denis!" His suspicions were confirmed by the reward of twenty thousand francs, which Blanche imprudently promised him in case of success, and by the five hundred francs which she paid in advance. "And where shall I have the honor of writing to you, madame?" he inquired.

"Nowhere," replied Blanche. "I shall be passing by here from time to time, and I will call."

When the two women left the house, Chefteux followed them. "For once," thought he, "I believe that fortune smiles on me." To discover his new client's name and rank was but child's play for Fouche's former pupil; and indeed his task was all the easier since they had no suspicion whatever of his designs.

Blanche, who had heard his powers of discernment so highly praised, was confident of success, and all the way back to the hotel she was congratulating herself on the step she had taken. "In less than a month," she said to Aunt Medea, "we shall have the child; and it will be a protection to us."

But the following week she realized the extent of her imprudence. On visiting Chefteux again, she was received with such marks of respect that she at once saw she was known. Still, she would have made another attempt to deceive the detective, but he checked her. "First of all," he said, with a good-humored smile, "I ascertain the identity of the persons who honor me with their confidence. It is a proof of my ability, which I give gratis. But madame need have no fears. I am discreet by nature and by profession. Many ladies of the highest rank are in the position of Madame la Duchesse."

So Chefteux still believed that the Duchess de Sairmeuse was searching for her own child. She did not try to convince him to the contrary, for it was better he should believe this than suspect the truth.

Blanche's position was now truly pitiable. She found herself entangled in a net, and each movement, far from freeing her, tightened the meshes round her. Three persons were acquainted with the secret which threatened her life and honor; and under these circumstances, how could she hope to prevent it from becoming more widely known? She was, moreover, at the mercy of three unscrupulous masters; and at a word, a gesture, or a look from them, her haughty spirit must bow in meek subservience. And her time, moreover, was no longer at her own disposal; for Martial had returned, and they had taken up their abode at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, where the young duchess was compelled to live under the scrutiny of fifty servants, more or less interested in watching her, in criticizing her acts, and discovering her thoughts. Aunt Medea, it is true, was of great assistance. Blanche purchased a new dress for her whenever she bought one for herself, took her about with her on all occasions, and the dependent relative expressed her satisfaction in the most enthusiastic terms, de-

claring her willingness to do anything for her benefactress. Nor did Chefteux give Blanche much more annoyance. Every three months he presented a memorandum of investigation expenses, which usually amounted to some ten thousand francs; and so long as she paid him it was plain he would be silent. He had given her to understand, however, that he should expect an annuity of twenty-four thousand francs; and once, when Blanche remarked that he must abandon the search if nothing had been discovered at the end of two years: "Never," replied he; "I shall continue the search as long as I live."

In addition to these two there was Chupin, who proved a constant terror. Blanche had been compelled to give him twenty thousand francs to begin with. He declared that his younger brother had come to Paris in pursuit of him, accusing him of having stolen their father's hoard, and demanding his share with his knife in his hand. There had been a battle, and it was with his head bound up in blood-stained linen that Chupin made his appearance before Blanche. "Give me the sum that the old man buried," said he, "and I will allow my brother to think I stole it. It is not very pleasant to be regarded as a thief, when one's an honest man, but I will bear it for your sake. If you refuse, however, I shall be compelled to tell him where I've obtained my money, and how." Naturally enough Blanche complied with this demand, for how could she do otherwise?

If her tormentor possessed all his father's vices, depravity, and cold-blooded perversity, he had certainly not inherited the parental intelligence or tact. Instead of taking the precautions which his interests required, he seemed to find a brutal pleasure in compromising the duchess. He was a constant visitor at the Hotel de Sairmeuse. He called at all hours, morning, noon, and night, without in the least troubling himself about Martial. And the servants were amazed to see their haughty mistress unhesitatingly leave everything to receive this suspicious-looking character, who smelled so strongly of tobacco and alcohol. One evening, while a grand entertainment was progressing at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, he made his appearance, half drunk, and imperiously ordered the servants to go and tell Madame Blanche that he was there, waiting for her. She hastened to him in her magnificent evening dress, her face white with rage and shame beneath her tiara of diamonds. And when, in her exasperation, she refused to give the wretch what he demanded:

"So that's to say I'm to starve while you are reveling here!" he exclaimed. "I am not such a fool. Give me some money at once, or I will tell everything I know on the spot!" What could she do? She was obliged to yield, as she had always done before. And yet he grew more and more insatiable every day. Money filtered through his fingers as fast as water filters through a sieve. But he did not think of raising his vices to the height of the fortune which he squandered. He did not even provide himself with decent clothing, and from his appearance he might have been supposed to be a penniless beggar. One night he was arrested for fomenting a row in a low drinking-den, and the police, surprised at finding so much gold in such a beggarly-looking rascal's possession, accused him of being a thief. But he mentioned the name of the Duchesse de Sairmeuse, and on the following morning—Martial fortunately was in Vienna at the time—an inspector of police presented himself at the mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, and Blanche had to undergo the humiliation of confessing that she had given a large sum of money to this man, whose family she had known, and who, she added, had once rendered her an important service.

Sometimes her pertinacious tormentor changed his tactics. For instance, he declared that he disliked coming to the Hotel de Sairmeuse, as the servants treated him as if he were a mendicant; so whenever he required money he would write. And effectively, every week or so, there came a letter bidding Blanche bring such a sum, to such a place, and at such an hour. And the proud duchess was always punctual at the rendezvous. Soon afterward the rascal met, heaven knows where! a certain Aspasie Clapard, to whom he took a violent fancy, and although she was much older than himself, he wished to marry her. It was Blanche who paid for the wedding feast. Then Chupin again announced his desire of establishing himself in business, having resolved, he said, to live by his own exertions. So he purchased a wine merchant's stock, which the duchess paid for, and which he drank in no time. Next, his wife gave birth to a child, and Madame de Sairmeuse must pay for the baptism as she had paid for the wedding, only too happy that Chupin did not require her to stand as godmother to little Polyte, which idea he had at first entertained. On two occasions Blanche accompanied her husband to Vienna and to London, where he went on important diplomatic missions. She

remained abroad during three years, and during all that time she received at least one letter every week from Chupin. Ah! many a time she envied her victim's lot! What was Marie-Anne's death compared with the life she led! Her sufferings were measured by years, Marie-Anne's by minutes; and she said to herself, again and again, that the tortures of poison could not be so intolerable as was her agony.

XXXVIII

IT may be asked how it was that Martial had failed to discover or to suspect this singular state of affairs; but a moment's reflection will explain his ignorance. The head of a family, whether he dwells in an attic or in a palace, is always the last to know what is going on in his own home. He does not even suspect circumstances, with which every one else is fully acquainted; and, in Martial's case, the life he led was scarcely likely to lead him to the truth; for after all he and his wife were virtually strangers to one another. His manner toward her was perfect, full of deference and chivalrous courtesy; but they had nothing in common except a name and certain interests. Each lived his own life. They met only at dinner, or at the entertainments they gave—which were considered the most brilliant of Parisian society. The duchess had her own apartments, her private servants, carriages, horses, and table. At five-and-twenty, Martial, the last descendant of the great house of Sairmeuse—a man on whom destiny had apparently lavished every blessing—who was young, who possessed unbounded wealth, and a brilliant intellect, found himself literally overburdened with *ennui*. Marie-Anne's death had destroyed all his hopes of happiness; and realizing the emptiness of his life, he sought to fill the void with bustle and excitement. He threw himself headlong into politics, striving to find some relief from his despondency in the pleasures of power and satisfied ambition.

It is only just to say that Blanche had remained superior to circumstances; and that she had played the part of a happy,

contented woman with consummate skill. Her frightful sufferings and anxiety never marred the haughty serenity of her features. She soon won a place as one of the queens of Parisian society; and plunged into dissipation with a sort of frenzy. Was she endeavoring to divert her mind? Did she hope to overpower thought by excessive fatigue? To Aunt Medea alone did Blanche reveal her secret heart. "I am like a culprit who has been bound to the scaffold, and abandoned there by the executioner to live, as it were, till the ax falls of its own accord." And the ax might fall at any moment. A word, a trifle, an unlucky chance—she dared not say "a decree of Providence," and Martial would know everything. Such, in all its unspeakable horror, was the position of the beautiful and envied Duchesse de Sairmeuse. "She must be perfectly happy," said the world; but she felt herself sliding down the precipice to the awful depths below. Like a shipwrecked mariner clinging to a floating spar, she scanned the horizon with a despairing eye, and could only see the threatening clouds that betokened the coming tempest. Once it happened that six weeks went by without any news coming from Chupin. A month and a half! What had become of him? To Madame Blanche this silence was as ominous as the calm that precedes the storm. A line in a newspaper solved the mystery, however. Chupin was in prison. After drinking more heavily than usual one evening, he had quarreled with his brother, and killed him by a blow on the head with an iron bar. Lacheneur's blood was being visited on his betrayer's children. Chupin was tried, condemned to twenty years' hard labor, and sent to Brest. But this sentence afforded the duchess no relief. The culprit had written to her from his Paris prison; and he found the means to write to her from Brest. He confided his letters to comrades, whose terms of imprisonment had expired, and who came to the Hotel de Sairmeuse demanding an interview with the duchess. And she received them. They told her all the miseries they had endured "out there"; and usually ended by requesting some slight assistance.

One morning a man whose desperate manner quite frightened her brought the duchess this laconic note: "I am tired of starving here; I wish to make my escape. Come to Brest; you can visit the prison, and we will decide on some plan. If you refuse to do this, I shall apply to the duke, who will obtain my pardon in exchange for what I will tell him." Blanche was

dumb with horror. It was impossible, she thought, to sink lower than this.

"Well!" said the returned convict, harshly. "What answer shall I take to my comrade?"

"I will go—tell him I will go!" she said, driven to desperation. And in fact she made the journey, and visited the prison, but without finding Chupin. There had been a revolt the previous week, the troops had fired on the prisoners, and Chupin had been killed. Still the duchess dared not rejoice, for she feared that her tormentor had told his wife the secret of his power.

Indeed the widow—the Aspasie Clapard already mentioned—promptly made her appearance at the house in the Rue de Grenelle; but her manner was humble and supplicating. She had often heard her dear dead husband say that madame was his benefactress, and now she came to beg a little aid to enable her to open a small wine-shop. Her son Polyte—ah! such a good son! just eighteen years old, and such a help to his poor mother—had found a little house in a good situation for business, and if they only had three or four hundred francs—Blanche cut the story short by handing her supplicant a five hundred-franc note. "Either that woman's humility is a mask," thought the duchess, "or her husband has told her nothing."

Five days later Polyte Chupin presented himself. They needed three hundred francs more before they could commence business, he said, and he came on behalf of his mother to entreat the kind lady to advance them that amount. But being determined to discover exactly how she was situated, with regard to the widow, the duchess curtly refused, and the young fellow went off without a word. Evidently the mother and son were ignorant of the facts. Chupin's secret had died with him.

This happened early in January. Toward the close of February, Aunt Medea contracted inflammation of the lungs on leaving a fancy ball, which she attended in an absurd costume, in spite of all the attempts which her niece made to dissuade her. Her passion for dress killed her. Her illness lasted only three days; but her sufferings, physical and mental, were terrible. Constrained by fear of death to examine her own conscience, she saw plainly enough that profiting by her niece's crime had been as culpable as if she had actually aided her in committing it. Aunt Medea had been very devout in former

years, and now her superstitious fears were reawakened and intensified. Her faith returned, followed by a train of terrors. "I am lost, I am lost!" she cried, tossing to and fro on her bed; writhing and shrieking as if she already saw hell opening to engulf her. She called on the Holy Virgin and all the saints to protect her. She entreated Heaven to grant her time for repentance and expiation; and she even begged to see a priest, swearing she would make a full confession.

Paler than the dying woman, but still implacable, Blanche watched over her, aided by one of her maids in whom she had most confidence. "If this lasts long, I shall be ruined," she thought. "I shall be obliged to call for assistance, and she will betray me."

But it did not last long. The patient's delirium was followed by such utter prostration that it seemed as if each moment would be her last. But toward midnight she revived a little, and in a voice of intense feeling, she faltered: "You have had no pity on me, Blanche. You have deprived me of all hope in the life to come. Heaven will punish you. You will die like a dog yourself, and alone without a word of Christian counsel or encouragement. I curse you!" And she expired, just as the clock was striking two.

The time when Blanche would have given almost anything to know that Aunt Medea was under the ground had long since passed away. Now the poor old woman's death deeply affected her. She had lost an accomplice who had often consoled her, and she had gained nothing in return. Every one who was intimately acquainted with the Duchesse de Sairmeuse noticed her dejection, and was astonished by it. "Is it not strange," remarked her friends, "that the duchess—such a very superior woman—should grieve so much for that absurd relative of hers?" But Blanche's dejection was due in great measure to the sinister prophecies faltered by her dying aunt, to whom for self-protection she had denied the last consolations of religion. And as her mind reviewed the past she shuddered as the Sairmeuse peasants had done, when thinking of the fatality which pursued those who had shed, or helped to shed, so much innocent blood. What misfortunes had overtaken them all—from Chupin's sons to her father, the Marquis de Courtornieu, in whose mind not one spark of reason had gleamed for ten long years before his death. The Baron and the Baroness d'Escorval and old Corporal Bavois had departed this life within a

month of each other the previous year, mourned by every one, so that of all the people of diverse condition who had been connected with the troubles of Montaignac, Blanche knew of only four who were still alive: Maurice d'Escorval, who having studied the law, was now an investigating magistrate attached to the tribunal of the Seine; the Abbe Midon, who had come to Paris with Maurice, and Martial and herself.

There was another person at the recollection of whom she trembled, and whose name she dared not utter. This was Jean Lacheneur, Marie-Anne's brother. He had disappeared, and so completely that it might have been fancied he was dead, but an inward voice, more powerful than reason, told Blanche that this enemy was still alive, watching for his hour of vengeance. More troubled by her presentiments now than she had been by Chupin's persecutions in days gone by, Madame de Sairmeuse decided to apply to Chefteux in order to ascertain, if possible, what she had to expect. Fouche's former agent had not wavered in his devotion to the duchess. Every three months he presented his bill, which was paid without discussion; and to ease his conscience, he sent one of his men two or three times a year to prowl round Sairmeuse for a while. Animated by the hope of a magnificent reward, the spy promised his client, and —what was more to the purpose—promised himself, that he would discover this dreaded enemy. He started in quest of him, and had already begun to collect proofs of Jean's existence, when his investigations abruptly came to a close. One morning a man's body, literally hacked to pieces, was found in an old well not far from Sairmeuse. It was Chefteux, who had been murdered by some one who remained unknown. When Blanche read this news in a local journal she felt as a culprit might feel on hearing his death-warrant read. "The end is near," she murmured. "Lacheneur is coming."

The duchess was not mistaken. Jean had told the truth when he declared that he was not disposing of his sister's estate for his own benefit. In his opinion, Marie-Anne's fortune must be consecrated to one sacred purpose; and he would not divert the slightest portion of it to his personal requirements. He was absolutely penniless when the manager of a traveling theatrical company sojourning at Montaignac engaged him for a consideration of forty-five francs a month. From that day he lived the precarious life of a strolling player. He was poorly paid, and often reduced to abject poverty by lack

of engagements, or the impecuniosity of managers. His hatred had lost none of its virulence; but to wreak the vengeance he wished to wreak, he must have time and money at his disposal. But how could he accumulate money when he was often too poor even to appease his hunger? Still he did not renounce his hopes. His was a rancor which was only intensified by years. He was biding his time while he watched from the depths of his misery the brilliant fortunes of the house of Sairmeuse. He had waited sixteen years, when one of his friends procured him an engagement in Russia. The engagement was nothing; but during his stay at St. Petersburg the poor comedian was fortunate enough to obtain an interest in a theatrical enterprise, from which he realized a clear profit of a hundred thousand francs in less than six years. "Now," said he, "I can give up this life, for I have money enough to begin the struggle." And six weeks later he arrived at his native village.

Before carrying any of his designs into execution, he went to Sairmeuse to visit Marie-Anne's grave, the sight of which he felt would fan his smoldering animosity, and give him all the determination he needed as the cold, stern avenger of crime. This was his only motive in going, but, on the very evening of his arrival he learned through a garrulous old peasant woman that ever since his departure—that is to say, for a period of twenty years—two parties had been making persistent inquiries for a child which had been placed somewhere in the neighborhood. Jean knew that it was Marie-Anne's child they were seeking, and why they had not succeeded in finding it. But why were there two persons prosecuting these investigations? One was Maurice d'Escorval, of course, but who was the other? This information induced Jean to prolong his stay at Sairmeuse, where he tarried a whole month. By the expiration of that time he had traced the inquiries, which he could not at first comprehend, to one of Chefteux's agents. Through the latter, he reached Fouche's former spy himself; and finally succeeded in discovering that the second search had been instituted by no less a person than the Duchesse de Sairmeuse. This discovery bewildered him. How could Blanche have known that Marie-Anne had given birth to a child; and, knowing it, what possible interest could she have had in finding this abandoned babe, now grown to manhood? These two questions puzzled Jean considerably, and he could give them no satisfactory answer. "Chupin's son could tell me perhaps," he thought, "but

to obtain information from that quarter, I must pretend to be reconciled to the sons of the wretch who betrayed my father."

However, the traitor's children had been dead for several years, and after a long search, Jean only found the Widow Chupin, *nee* Aspasie Clapard, and her son Polyte. They were keeping a drinking-den not far from the Rue des Chateau-des-Rentiers; and their establishment, known as the Poivriere, enjoyed anything but an enviable reputation. Lacheneur cautiously questioned the widow and her son. He asked them if they knew of the crime at the Borderie—if they had heard that grandfather Chupin had committed murder and had been assassinated in his turn—if they had ever been told of an abandoned child, and of searches prosecuted to find it. But neither of these two had ever been at Sairmeuse in their lives, and when Lacheneur mentioned his name in hopes it might recall some recollection, they declared they had never heard it before. Jean was about to take his departure, despondently enough, when Mother Chupin, probably in the hope of pocketing a few pence, began to deplore her present misery, which was, she declared, all the harder to bear as she had wanted for nothing during her poor husband's lifetime, for he had always obtained as much money as he wanted from a lady of high degree, called the Duchesse de Sairmeuse.

Lacheneur uttered such a frightful oath that the old woman and her son started back in astonishment. He saw at once the close connection between Blanche's search for the child and her generosity to Chupin. "It was she who poisoned Marie-Anne," he said to himself. "It must have been through my sister herself that she became aware of the child's existence. She loaded the young Chupin with favors because he knew the crime she had committed—that crime in which his father had been only an accomplice."

He remembered Martial's oath at the murdered girl's bedside, and his heart overflowed with savage exultation. For he could already see his two enemies, the last of the Sairmeuses and the last of the Courtornieus, consummating his work of vengeance themselves. However, after all, this was mere conjecture; he must at any price ascertain whether his suppositions were correct. Drawing from his pocket several pieces of gold, and, throwing them on the table, he said: "I am rich; if you will obey me and keep my secret, your fortune is made."

A shrill cry of delight from mother and son outweighed any protestations of obedience. The Widow Chupin knew how to write, and Lacheneur then dictated this letter to her: "Madame la Duchesse—I shall expect you at my establishment to-morrow between twelve and four o'clock. It is on business connected with the Borderie. If at five o'clock I have not seen you, I shall carry to the post a letter for the duke."

"And if she comes, what am I to say to her?" asked the astonished widow.

"Nothing; you will merely ask her for money."

"If she comes, it is as I have guessed," he reflected.

She came. Hidden in the loft of the Poivriere, Jean, through an opening in the floor, saw the duchess hand Mother Chupin a bank-note. "Now, she is in my power!" he thought exultantly. "And I will drag her through sloughs of degradation before I deliver her up to her husband's vengeance!"

XXXIX

A FEW lines of the article consecrated to Martial in the "General Biography of Men of the Time," fittingly epitomize the history of his public life. "Martial de Sairmeuse," says the writer, "placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at the time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most unpopular measures. But the hostility he encountered, the danger in which he placed the throne, compelled him to retire from office, leaving behind him animosities which will only be extinguished with his life." In thus summing up Martial's public career, his biographer omits to say that if the Duc de Sairmeuse was wrong in his policy —and that depends entirely on the point of view from which his conduct is regarded—he was doubly wrong, since he was not possessed of that ardent conviction verging on fanaticism which makes men fools, heroes, and martyrs. He was not even truly ambitious. When those associated with him wit-

nessed his passionate struggles and unceasing activity, they thought him actuated by an insatiable thirst for power. But, in reality, he cared little or nothing for it. He considered its burdens heavy; its compensations slight. His pride was too lofty to feel any satisfaction in applause; and flattery disgusted him. Often, during some brilliant fete, his acquaintances and subordinates, finding him thoughtful and preoccupied, respectfully refrained from disturbing him. "His mind is occupied with momentous questions," they fancied. "Who can tell what important decisions may result from his reverie?" But in this surmise they were mistaken. And indeed, at that very moment when royal favor filled his rivals' hearts with envy, when occupying the highest position a subject can aspire to, and it seemed he could have nothing left to wish for in this world, Martial was saying to himself: "What an empty life! What weariness and vexation of spirit! To live for others—what a mockery!"

He looked at his wife, radiant in her beauty, worshiped like a queen, and sighed. He thought of her who was dead—Marie-Anne—the only woman he had ever loved. She was never absent from his mind, and after all these years he saw her yet, stretched cold, rigid, lifeless, on the canopied bedstead, in that luxurious room at the Borderie. Time, far from effacing from his heart the image of the fair girl whose beauty unwittingly had wrought such wo—had only intensified youthful impressions, endowing the lost idol with almost superhuman grace of person and character. Ah! if fate had but given him Marie-Anne for his wife! Thus said Martial, again and again, picturing the happiness which then would have been his. They would have remained at Sairmeuse. They would have had children playing round them! And he would not be condemned to this continual warfare—to this hollow, unsatisfying, restless life. The truly happy are not those who parade their dignities and opulence before the eyes of the multitude. They rather hide themselves from the curious gaze, and they are right; for here on earth happiness is almost a crime. So thought Martial; and he, the envied statesman, often said to himself, with a feeling of vexation: "To love, and to be loved—that is everything! All else is vanity."

He had really tried to love his wife; he had done his best to resuscitate the feeling of admiration with which she had

inspired him at their first meeting; but he had not succeeded. It seemed as if there was between them a wall of ice which nothing could melt, and which only grew and expanded as time went on. "Why is it?" he wondered, again and again. "It is incomprehensible. There are days when I could swear she loves me. Her character, formerly so irritable, is entirely changed; she is gentleness itself." But still he could not conquer his aversion; it was stronger than his own will.

These unavailing regrets, the disappointment and sorrow that preyed upon his mind, undoubtedly aggravated the bitterness and severity of Martial's policy. At least he knew how to fall nobly. He passed, even without a change of countenance, from all but omnipotence to a position so compromising that his very life was endangered. On perceiving his antechambers, formerly thronged with flatterers and place-hunters, now empty and deserted, he laughed—naturally, sincerely, without the least affectation. "The ship is sinking," said he; "the rats have deserted it." He did not even turn pale when the mob gathered outside his house, hurling stones at his windows, and hooting and cursing the fallen statesman; and when Otto, his faithful valet de chambre, entreated him to assume a disguise, and make his escape through the gardens, he quietly replied: "By no means! I am simply odious; I don't wish to become ridiculous!" They could not even dissuade him from going to a window and looking down on the rabble in the street below. A singular idea had just occurred to him. "If Jean Lacheneur is still alive," he thought, "how much he would enjoy this! And if he is alive, no doubt he is there in the foremost rank, urging on the crowd." And he wished to see. But Jean Lacheneur was in Russia at that epoch.

The excitement eventually subsided; and the Hotel de Sairmeuse was not seriously threatened. However, Martial realized that it would be better for him to go away for a while, and allow people to forget him. He did not ask the duchess to accompany him. "The fault has been mine entirely," he said to her, "and it would be most unjust to make you suffer for it by condemning you to exile. Remain here; I think it will be much better for you to remain." She did not offer to go with him, although she longed to do so, but then she dared not leave Paris. She knew that she must remain in order to secure her persecutor's silence. On the two occasions when she had left Paris before, everything was near

being discovered, and yet then she had had Aunt Medea to take her place. Martial went away, accompanied only by his servant, Otto. In intelligence, this man was decidedly superior to his position; he was indeed decently well-off, and he had a hundred reasons—one, by the way, was a very pretty one—for desiring to remain in Paris; but his master was in trouble, and so he did not hesitate. During four years the Duc de Sairmeuse wandered through Europe, always chafing beneath the burden of a life no longer animated by interest or sustained by hope. He remained for a time in London, then he went to Vienna, and afterward to Venice. One day he was seized by an irresistible desire to see Paris again, and he returned. It was not a very prudent step, perhaps, for his bitterest enemies—personal enemies, whom he had mortally offended and persecuted—were in power; but still he did not hesitate. Besides, how could they injure him, since he had no favors to ask, no cravings of ambition to satisfy?

The exile which had weighed so heavily on him, the loneliness he had endured, had softened his nature and inclined his heart to tenderness; and he returned firmly resolved to overcome his aversion to his wife, and seek a reconciliation. "Old age is coming," he thought. "If I have not the love of youth by my fireside, I may at least have a friend." Blanche was astonished by his manner toward her when he returned. She almost believed she had found again the Martial of the old days at Courtornieu, but the realization of the dream, so fondly cherished and so long deferred, now proved only another torture added to all the others. Still, Martial was striving to carry his plan into execution, when one day the following brief note came to him through the post: "Monsieur le Duc—If I were in your place, I would watch my wife."

It was only an anonymous letter, and yet on perusing it Martial's blood mounted to his forehead. "Can she have a lover?" he thought. Then reflecting on his own conduct toward his wife since their marriage, he said to himself: "And if she has, what right have I to complain? Did I not tacitly give her back her liberty?" However, he was greatly troubled; and yet he did not once think of playing the spy.

A few mornings afterward, at about eleven o'clock, he was returning from a ride on horseback, and was not thirty paces from the Hotel de Sairmeuse when he suddenly perceived a lady hurriedly emerge from the house. She was very plainly

dressed—entirely in black—but her whole appearance recalled that of the duchess in a striking fashion. "That's certainly my wife," thought Martial, "but why is she dressed in that fashion?" Then, yielding to a sudden impulse, he walked his horse up the Rue de Grenelle behind the woman in black. Blanche it was. She was tripping swiftly over the pavement, keeping her face shrouded by a thick veil, and she never once turned her head. On reaching the Rue Taranne, she spoke hurriedly to a cab-driver on the stand, and then sprang into his vehicle. The Jehu was already on his box, and he at once gave his bony horse such a vigorous cut of the whip that it was evident he had just been promised a princely gratuity. The cab had already turned into the Rue du Dragon, and Martial, ashamed of what he had already done and irresolute as to what he should do now, was still tarrying at the corner of the Rue des Saint-Peres, where he had originally stopped his horse. Scarcely daring to entertain the suspicions that flitted across his mind, he tried to deceive himself. "After all," he muttered, "it is of no use advancing. The cab's a long way off by now, and I couldn't overtake it." Still he mechanically gave his horse the rein, and when he reached the Croix Rouge he espied Blanche's vehicle among a crowd of others. He recognized it by its green body and wheels striped with white. This decided him. The cab-driver had just managed to extricate himself from the block which traffic so frequently causes hereabout, and whipping up his horse once more turned literally at a gallop up the Rue du Vieux Colombier—leading into the Place St. Sulpice. Thence he took the shortest cut to gain the outer boulevards.

Martial's thoughts were busy as he trotted along a hundred yards or so behind the vehicle. "She's in a terrible hurry," he said to himself. "But this is scarcely the quarter for a lover's rendezvous." The cab had indeed now reached the squalid region extending beyond the Place d'Italie. It turned into the Rue du Chateau des Rentiers and soon drew up before a tract of waste ground. The Duchesse de Sairmeuse then hastily alighted, and, without stopping to look to the right or to the left, hurried across the open space. Martial had prudently paused in the rear. Not far from him he espied a man sitting on a block of stone and apparently immersed in the task of coloring a clay pipe. "Will you hold my horse a moment?" inquired Martial.

"Certainly," answered the man, rising to his feet. He wore a workman's blouse and a long beard, and his aspect altogether was scarcely prepossessing. Had Martial been less preoccupied, his suspicions might have been aroused by the malicious smile that curved the fellow's lips; and had he scrutinized him closely, he would perhaps have recognized him. For the seeming vagrant was Jean Lacheneur. Since forwarding that anonymous letter to the Duc de Sairmeuse, he had compelled the duchess to multiply her visits to the Widow Chupin's den, and on each occasion he had watched for her arrival. "So, if her husband decides to follow her I shall know it," he thought. It was indispensable for the success of his plans that Blanche should be watched by her husband. For from among a thousand schemes of revenge, Jean had chosen the most frightful his fevered brain could conceive. He longed to see the haughty Duchesse de Sairmeuse subjected to the vilest ignominy, and Martial in the hands of the lowest of the low. He pictured a bloody struggle in this miserable den; the sudden arrival of the police, summoned by himself, and the indiscriminate arrest of all the parties present. He gloated over the thought of a trial in which the crime committed at the Borderie would be brought to light; he saw the duke and the duchess in prison, and the great names of Sairmeuse and Courtornieu shrouded in eternal disgrace. And he believed that nothing was wanting to insure the success of his plans. He had two miserable wretches who were capable of any crime at his disposal; and an unfortunate youth named Gustave, whom poverty and cowardice had made his willing slave, was intended to play the part of Marie-Anne's son. These three accomplices had no suspicions of Lacheneur's real intentions, while, as for the Widow Chupin and her son, if they suspected some infamous plot, all they really knew in regard to it was the duchess's name. Moreover, Jean held Polyte and his mother completely under his control by the wealth he had promised them if they served him faithfully. If Martial decided to follow his wife into the Poivriere the first time he watched her, Jean had, moreover, so arranged matters that the duke would at first suppose that Blanche had been led there by charity. "But he will not go in," thought the seeming vagrant, as, holding Martial's horse some little distance off, he looked in the direction of the hovel. "Monsieur le Duc it too cunning for that."

And Martial did not go in. Though he was horrified when

he saw his wife enter so vile a den, as if she were at home there, he said to himself that he should learn nothing by following her. He, therefore, contented himself by making a thorough examination of the hovel from outside, and then remounting his horse, and throwing Lacheneur a silver coin, he started back home at a gallop. He was completely mystified: he did not know what to think, what to imagine, what to believe. But, at the same time, he was fully resolved to fathom the mystery; and as soon as he returned home he sent Otto out in search of information. He could confide everything to this devoted servant from whom he had no secrets. At four o'clock in the afternoon the faithful valet de chambre returned with an expression of consternation on his face. "What is it?" asked Martial, divining some great misfortune.

"Ah, sir, the mistress of that wretched den is the widow of Chupin's son—"

Martial's face turned ghastly pale. He knew life well enough to understand that since the duchess had been compelled to submit to these people's power, they must be masters of some secret which she was anxious at any price to keep unrevealed. But what secret could it be? The years which had furrowed Martial's brow had not cooled the ardor of his blood. He was, as he had always been, a man of impulse, and so, without pausing, he rushed to his wife's apartments.

"Madame has just gone downstairs to receive the Comtesse de Mussidan and the Marquise d'Arlange," said the maid whom he met on the landing.

"Very well; I will wait for her here. You may retire."

So saying, Martial entered Blanche's dressing-room. It was in disorder, for, after returning from the Poivriere, the duchess was still engaged at her toilet when visitors were announced. The wardrobe doors stood open, two or three chairs were encumbered with wearing apparel, and Blanche's watch, her purse, and several bunches of keys were lying on the dressing table and the mantelpiece. Martial did not sit down. His self-possession was returning. "I will commit no act of folly," he thought; "if I question her, I shall learn nothing. I must be silent and watchful."

He was about to retire, when, on glancing round the room, he noticed a large casket, inlaid with silver, which had belonged to his wife ever since she was a girl, and which accompanied her everywhere. "That, no doubt, contains the solution of the

mystery," he said to himself. This was one of those moments when a man obeys the dictates of passion without pausing to reflect. Seeing the keys on the mantelpiece, he seized them, and endeavored to find one that would fit the lock of the casket. The fourth key opened it. It was full of papers. With feverish haste, Martial examined their contents. He had thrown aside several unimportant letters, when he came to a bill that read as follows: "Search made for Madame de Sairmeuse's child. Expenses for the third quarter of the year 18—." Martial's brain reeled. A child! His wife had a child! But he read on: "For the services of two agents at Sairmeuse, ——. For expenses attending my own journey, ——. Divers gratuities, ——. Etc., etc." The total amounted to six thousand francs; and it was receipted "Chefteux." With a sort of cold rage, Martial continued his examination of the casket's contents, and found a miserably written note, which said: "Two thousand francs this evening, or I will tell the duke the history of the affair at the Borderie." Then there were several more of Chefteux's bills; next, a letter from Aunt Medea, in which she spoke of prison and remorse; and, finally, at the bottom of the casket, he found the marriage certificate of Marie-Anne Lacheneur and Maurice d'Escorval, drawn up by the cure of Vigano and signed by the old physician and Corporal Bavois.

The truth was as clear as daylight. Stunned, frozen with horror, Martial scarcely had strength enough to place the letters in the casket again and restore it to its place. Then he tottered back to his own room, clinging to the walls for support. "It was she who murdered Marie-Anne," he murmured. He was confounded, terror-stricken, by the perfidy of this woman who was his wife—by her criminal audacity, cool calculation and assurance, and her marvelous powers of dissimulation.

Still he swore he would discover everything, either through the duchess or through the Widow Chupin; and he ordered Otto to procure him a costume such as was generally worn by the frequenters of the Poivriere. He did not know how soon he might have need of it. This happened early in February, and from that moment Blanche did not take a single step without being watched. Not a letter reached her that her husband had not previously read. And she had not the slightest suspicion of the constant supervision to which she was subjected. Martial did not leave his room; he pretended to be ill.

He felt he could not meet his wife and remain silent. He remembered the oath of vengeance which he had sworn over Marie-Anne's lifeless form only too well. However, the watch which Otto kept over the duchess, and the perusal of the letters addressed to her, did not yield any fresh information, and for this reason: Polyte Chupin had been arrested on a charge of theft, and this accident caused a delay in the execution of Lacheneur's plans.

But at last the latter prepared everything for Shrove Sunday, the 20th of February. On the previous day, in accordance with her instructions, the Widow Chupin wrote to the duchess that she must come to the Poivriere on Sunday night at eleven o'clock. On that same evening Jean was to meet his accomplices at a ball at the Rainbow—a wine-shop bearing a very unenviable reputation—and give them their final instructions. These accomplices were to open the scene; he was only to appear at the *denouement*. "All is well arranged; the mechanism will work of its own accord," he said to himself. But, as is already known, the "mechanism," as he styled it, failed to act.

On receiving the Widow Chupin's summons, Blanche revolted for a moment. The lateness of the hour, the distance, the isolation of the appointed meeting-place, frightened her. Still, she was obliged to submit, and on Sunday evening she furtively left the house, accompanied by Camille, the same maid who had been present when Aunt Medea died. The duchess and Camille were attired like women of the lowest order, and felt no fear of being recognized. And yet a man was watching who quickly followed them. This was Martial. He had perused the note appointing this rendezvous even before his wife, and had disguised himself in the costume Otto had procured for him—that of a laborer about the quays. Then, in hope of making himself absolutely unrecognizable, he had soiled and matted his hair and beard; his hands were grimed with dirt; and he really seemed to belong to the class of which he wore the attire. Otto had begged to be allowed to accompany his master; but the duke refused, remarking that his revolver would prove quite sufficient protection. He knew Otto well enough, however, to feel certain he would disobey him.

Ten o'clock was striking when Blanche and Camille left the house, and it did not take them five minutes to reach the Rue Taranne. There was only one cab on the stand, which they at once hired. This circumstance drew from Martial an oath

worthy of his costume. But he reflected that, since he knew where to find his wife, a slight delay in obtaining a vehicle would not matter. He soon found one, and, thanks to a gratuity of ten francs, the driver started off to the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers as fast as his horse could go. However, the duke had scarcely alighted before he heard the rumbling of another vehicle, which pulled up abruptly a little distance behind. "Otto is evidently following me," he thought. And he then started across the open space in the direction of the Poivriere. The prevailing silence and absence of life were rendered still more oppressive by a chill fog which heralded an approaching thaw. Martial stumbled and slipped at almost every step he took over the rough, snow-covered ground; but at last through the mist he distinguished a building in the distance. This was the Poivriere. The light burning inside filtered through the heart-shaped apertures cut in the upper part of the shutters, and it almost seemed as if a pair of lurid eyes were striving to peer through the fog.

Could it really be possible that the Duchesse de Sairmeuse was there! Martial cautiously approached the window, and, clinging to the hinges of the shutters, raised himself up so that he could glance through one of the apertures. Yes, there was no mistake. His wife and Camille were seated at a table before a large punch-bowl, in the company of two ragged, leering scoundrels, and a soldier of youthful appearance. In the centre of the room stood the Widow Chupin, with a small glass in her hand. She was talking with great volubility, and punctuating her sentences with occasional sips of brandy. The impression this scene produced on Martial was so acute that his hold relaxed and he dropped to the ground. A ray of pity stole into his soul, for he vaguely realized the frightful suffering which had been the murderess's chastisement. But he wished for another glance, and so once more he lifted himself up to the opening and looked in. The old woman had disappeared; the young soldier had risen from the table, and was talking and gesticulating earnestly. Blanche and Camille were listening to him with the closest attention. The two men who were sitting face to face, with their elbows on the table, were looking at each other; and Martial saw them exchange a significant glance. He was not wrong. The scoundrels were plotting "a rich haul." Blanche, who had dressed herself with much care, and to render her disguise perfect had encased her

feet in large, coarse shoes, that were causing her well-nigh intolerable agony—Blanche had neglected to remove her superb diamond earrings. She had forgotten them, but Lacheneur's accomplices had noticed them, and were now glancing at them with eyes that glittered more brilliantly than the diamonds themselves. While awaiting Lacheneur's coming, these wretches, as had been agreed upon, were playing the part which he had imposed upon them. For this and their assistance afterward they were to receive a certain sum of money. But they were thinking that this sum did not represent a quarter of the value of these jewels, and their looks only too plainly said: "What if we could secure them and go off before Lacheneur comes!" The temptation was too strong to be resisted. One of the scoundrels suddenly rose, and seizing the duchess by the back of the neck, forced her head down on the table. The diamonds would have been at once torn from her ears if it had not been for Camille, who bravely came to her mistress's assistance. Martial could endure no more. He sprang to the door of the hovel, opened it, and entered, bolting it behind him.

"Martial!" "Monsieur le Duc!" cried Blanche and Camille in the same breath, for, despite his disguise, they had both recognized him. Their exclamations turned the momentary stupor of their assailants into fury; and both ruffians precipitated themselves on Martial, determined to kill him. But, springing to one side, the duke avoided them. He had his revolver in his hand; he fired twice, and both the scoundrels fell. However, he was not yet safe, for the young soldier rushed forward and attempted to disarm him. Then began a furious struggle, in the midst of which Martial did not leave off crying, in a panting voice, "Fly! Blanche, fly! Otto is not far off. The name—save the honor of the name!"

The two women obeyed him, making their escape through the back door, which opened into the garden; and they had scarcely done so before a violent knocking was heard at the front entry. The police were coming! This increased Martial's frenzy; and in a supreme effort to free himself from his assailant, he hurled him backward so violently that, striking his head against a corner of the table, the young soldier fell on to the floor, and lay there to all appearance dead. In the mean while, the Widow Chupin, who had hastened from the room above on hearing the uproar, was shrieking on the staircase, while at the front door a voice was crying: "Open

in the name of the law!" Martial might have fled; but if he fled the duchess might be captured, for he would certainly be pursued. He saw the peril at a glance, and determined to remain. Shaking the Widow Chupin by the arm, he said to her in an imperious voice: "If you know how to hold your tongue you shall have a hundred thousand francs." Then, drawing a table before the door opening into the back room, he intrenched himself behind it as a rampart, and awaited the enemy's approach.

The next moment the door was forced open, and a squad of police agents, headed by Inspector Gevrol, entered the room. "Surrender!" cried the inspector.

Martial did not move; his revolver was turned toward the intruders. "If I can parley with them and hold them in check only two minutes, all may yet be saved," he thought. He obtained the required delay; then throwing his weapon to the ground, he was about to bound through the back door when a police agent, who had gone round to the rear of the house, seized him about the body and threw him to the floor. From this side he expected only assistance, hence he exclaimed: "Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

In the twinkling of an eye he was bound; and two hours later he was an inmate of the station-house at the Place d'Italie. He had played his part so perfectly that he had deceived even Gevrol. His assailants were dead, and he could rely upon the Widow Chupin. But he knew that the trap had been set for him by Jean Lacheneur; and he read a whole volume of suspicion in the eyes of the young officer who had cut off his retreat, and who was called Lecoq by his companions.

XL

THE Duc de Sairmeuse was one of those men who remain superior to circumstances. He was possessed of vast experience and great natural shrewdness. His mind was quick to act and fertile in resources. But when he found himself immured in the damp and loathsome station-house at the Place

d'Italie, after the terrible scene we have just recalled, he felt inclined to relinquish all hope. He knew that justice does not trust to appearances, and that when an investigating magistrate finds himself in the presence of a mystery, he does not rest until he has fathomed it. He knew only too well, moreover, that if his identity were established the authorities would endeavor to discover the reason that had led him to the Poivriere; now he could scarcely doubt but what this reason would soon be discovered, and in that case the crime at the Borderie, and the duchess's guilt, would undoubtedly be made public. This meant the Assize Court for the woman who bore his name—imprisonment, perhaps execution; at all events, a frightful scandal, dishonor, eternal disgrace! And the power he had wielded in former days was a positive disadvantage to him now, when his past position was filled by his political adversaries. Among them were two personal enemies, whose vanity he once had wounded, and who had never forgiven him. They would certainly not neglect the present opportunity for revenge. At the thought of such an ineffaceable stain on the great name of Sairmeuse, which was his pride and glory, reason almost forsook him. "My God, inspire me," he murmured. "How shall I save the honor of the name?"

He saw but one chance of salvation—death. They now believed him to be one of the miserable loafers who haunt the suburbs of Paris; if he were dead they would not trouble themselves about his identity. "It is the only way!" he thought, and he was indeed endeavoring to find some means of committing suicide when suddenly he heard a bustle outside his cell. A few moments afterward the door was opened and a man was thrust in—a man who staggered a few steps, fell heavily on to the floor, and then began to snore. The new arrival was apparently only some vulgar drunkard.

A minute or so elapsed, and then a vague, strange hope touched Martial's heart—no, he must be mistaken—and yet—yes, certainly this drunkard was Otto—Otto in disguise, and almost unrecognizable! It was a bold ruse and no time must be lost in profiting by it. Martial stretched himself on a bench, as if to sleep, and in such a way that his head was close to Otto's. "The duchess is out of danger," murmured the faithful servant.

"For to-day, perhaps. But to-morrow, through me, everything will be discovered."

"Have you told them who you are?"

"No; all the police agents but one took me for a vagabond."

"You must continue to personate that character."

"What good will it do? Jean Lacheneur will betray me." But Martial, though he little knew it, had no need to fear Lacheneur for the present, at least. A few hours previously, on his way in the dark from the Rainbow to the Poivriere, Jean had fallen to the bottom of a stone quarry, and fractured his skull. The laborers, on returning to their work early in the morning, found him lying there senseless; and that very moment they were carrying him to the hospital.

Although Otto also was ignorant of this circumstance, he did not seem discouraged. "There will be some way of getting rid of Lacheneur," said he, "if you will only sustain your present character. An escape is an easy matter when a man has millions at his command."

"They will ask me who I am, where I've come from, and how I've lived."

"You speak English and German, don't you? Tell them that you have just returned from foreign parts; that you were a foundling, and that you have always lived a roving life."

"How can I prove that?"

Otto drew a little nearer his master, and said, impressively: "We must agree on our plans, for success depends on a perfect understanding between us. I have a sweetheart in Paris—and no one knows of our connection. She is as sharp as steel. Her name is Milner, and she keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg, in the Rue Saint-Quentin. You can say that you arrived here from Leipsic on Sunday; that you went to that hotel, that you left your trunk there, and that it has a card nailed to the top with your name—say May, foreign artist."

"Capital!" said Martial, approvingly. And then, with extraordinary quickness and precision, they agreed, point by point, on their plan of defense. When everything had been arranged, Otto pretended to awake from the heavy sleep of intoxication; he clamored to be released, and the keeper finally opened the door and set him at liberty. Before leaving the station-house, however, he succeeded in throwing a note to the Widow Chupin, who was imprisoned in the opposite cell. So, when Lecoq, after his skilful investigations at the Poivriere, rushed to the Place d'Italie, panting with hope and ambition, he found himself outwitted by these men, who were inferior to him in penetration, but whose tact was superior to his own.

Martial's plans being fully formed, he intended to carry them out with absolute perfection of detail, and, after his removal to the Depot, he was preparing himself for the investigating magistrate's visit, when Maurice d'Escorval entered his cell. They recognized each other. They were both terribly agitated, and the examination was an examination only in name. After Maurice's departure Martial attempted to destroy himself; for he had no faith in his former enemy's generosity. But when he found M. Segmuller occupying Maurice's place the next morning, he really believed that he was saved.

Then began that struggle between the magistrate and Lecoq on one side, and the prisoner on the other—a struggle in which neither conquered. Martial knew that Lecoq was the only person he had to fear, still he bore him no ill-will. Faithful to his nature, which compelled him to be just even to his enemies, he could not help admiring the astonishing penetration and perseverance of this young police agent, who, undismayed by the obstacles surrounding him, struggled on, unassisted, to reach the truth. But Lecoq was always outwitted by Otto, the mysterious accomplice, who seemed to know his every movement in advance. At the Morgue, at the Hotel de Mariembourg, with Toinon, the wife of Polyte Chupin, as well as with Polyte himself, Lecoq was always just a little too late. He detected the secret correspondence between the prisoner and his accomplice, and he was even ingenious enough to discover the key to it, but this served no purpose. A man, who had seen a rival, or rather a future master, in Lecoq—in short, Gevrol—had betrayed him. If his efforts to arrive at the truth through the jeweler and the Marquise d'Arlange had failed, it was only because Blanche had not purchased the diamond earrings she wore at the Poivriere at any shop, but from one of her friends, the Baroness de Watchau. And finally, if no one in Paris had missed the Duc de Sairmeuse, it was because—thanks to an understanding between the duchess, Otto, and Camille—no other inmates of the Hotel de Sairmeuse suspected his absence. All the servants supposed that the duke was confined to his room by illness. His breakfast and dinner were taken up to his private apartments every day; and soups and tisanes were prepared ostensibly for his benefit.

So the weeks went by, and Martial was expecting to be summoned before the Assize Court and condemned under the name of May, when he was afforded an opportunity to escape. Too

shrewd not to discern the trap that had been set for him, it was only after horrible hesitation that he decided to alight from the prison-van, determined to run the risk, and commending himself for protection to his lucky star. And he decided wisely, for that same night he leaped over his own garden wall, leaving an escaped convict, Joseph Couturier by name, whom he had picked up in a low eating-house, as a hostage in Lecoq's hands. Warned by Madame Milner, thanks to a blunder which Lecoq committed, Otto was waiting for his master. In the twinkling of an eye Martial's beard fell under the razor; he plunged into the bath which was already prepared, and his clothes were burned. And he it was who, during the search a few minutes later, had the hardihood to call out: "Otto, by all means allow these men to do their duty." But he did not breathe freely until the police agents had departed. "At last," he exclaimed, "honor is saved! We have outwitted Lecoq!"

He had just left his bath, and assumed a dressing-gown, when Otto handed him a letter from the duchess. He hastily opened the envelope and read: "You are safe. You know everything. I am dying. Farewell. I loved you."

With two bounds he reached his wife's apartments. The outer door was locked: he burst it open; but he came too late. Blanche was dead—poisoned, like Marie-Anne; but she had procured a drug having an instantaneous effect, and extended on her couch, clad in her wonted apparel, her hands folded over her breast, she seemed only asleep. A tear glistened in Martial's eye. "Poor, unhappy woman!" he murmured; "may God forgive you as I forgive you—you whose crime has been so frightfully expiated here below!"

EPILOGUE

SAFE, in his own princely mansion, and surrounded by an army of retainers, the Duc de Sairmeuse had triumphantly exclaimed: "We have outwitted Lecoq!"

In this he was right; for the young detective was certainly nonplused for the time being; but when his grace fancied him-

self forever beyond this wily, keen-witted, aspiring agent's reach, he was most decidedly wrong. Lecoq was not the man to sit down with folded hands and brood over the humiliation of defeat. Before he went to old Tabaret, he was beginning to recover from his despondency; and when he left that experienced detective's presence, he had regained his courage, energy, and command over his faculties. "Well, my worthy friend," he remarked to Father Absinthe, who was trotting along by his side, "you heard what the great Monsieur Tabaret said, didn't you? So, you see, I was right."

But his companion evinced no enthusiasm. "Yes, you were right," he responded, in wobegone tones.

"Do you think we are ruined by two or three mistakes? Nonsense! I will soon turn to-day's defeat into a glorious victory."

"Ah! you might do so perhaps, if—they don't dismiss us from the force."

This doleful remark recalled Lecoq to a sense of his present position. He and Absinthe had allowed a prisoner to slip through their fingers. That was vexatious, it is true; but, on the other hand, they had captured a most notorious criminal—Joseph Couturier. Surely there was some comfort in that. Still, of course, they both might be dismissed—and yet Lecoq could have borne the prospect, dismal as it was, if it had not been for the thought that dismissal would forever prevent him from following up the Poivriere affair. What would his superiors say when he told them that May and the Duc de Sairmeuse were one and the same person. They would, no doubt, shrug their shoulders and turn up their noses. "Still, M. Segmuller will believe me," he thought. "But will he dare to take any action in the matter without plain evidence before him?"

This was very unlikely, as Lecoq fully realized, and for a moment he asked himself if he and his fellows could not make a descent on the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and, on some pretext or other, compel the duke to show himself. It would then be easy to identify him as the prisoner May. However, after a little thought he dismissed the idea. "It would be a stupid expedient!" he exclaimed. "Two such men as the duke and his accomplice are not likely to be caught napping. They are prepared for such a visit, and we should only have our labor for our pains."

He made these reflections in a low tone of voice; and Father

Absinthe's curiosity was aroused. "Excuse me," said the old veteran, "I don't quite understand you."

"I say that we must find some tangible proof before asking permission to proceed further—" Lecoq paused with knitted brows. An idea had occurred to him. He fancied he could prove complicity between at least one of the witnesses summoned to give evidence, and some member of the duke's household. He was indeed thinking of Madame Milner, the landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg, and of his first meeting with her. He saw her again, in his mind's eye, standing on a chair, her face on a level with a cage, covered with a large piece of black silk, while she persistently repeated three or four German words to a starling, who with equal persistency retorted: "Camille! Where is Camille?" "One thing is certain," exclaimed Lecoq aloud, "if Madame Milner—who is a German, and who speaks French with the strongest possible German accent—had reared this bird, it would either have spoken in German or else in French, and in the latter case with the same accent as its mistress. So it can't have been in her possession long; but then who can have given it to her?"

"Father Absinthe was beginning to grow impatient. "In sober earnest, what are you talking about?" he asked, petulantly.

"I say that if there is any one at the Hotel de Sairmeuse named Camille, I have the proof I wish for. Come, Papa Absinthe, let us hurry on." And without another word of explanation, he dragged his companion rapidly toward the Seine.

When they reached the Rue de Grenelle, Lecoq perceived a commissionaire leaning against the door of a wine-shop. He walked straight toward him. "Come, my good fellow," said he. "I want you to go to the Hotel de Sairmeuse and ask for Camille. Tell her that her uncle is waiting for her here."

"But, sir—"

"What, you haven't gone yet?"

The messenger started off, and the two police agents entered the wine-shop, Father Absinthe scarcely having time to swallow a glass of brandy before the envoy returned. "I was unable to see Mademoiselle Camille," said he. "The house is closed from top to bottom. The duchess died very suddenly this morning."

"Ah! the wretch!" exclaimed the young police agent. Then controlling himself, he mentally added: "He must have killed

his wife on returning home, but his fate is sealed. Now, I shall be allowed to continue my investigations."

In less than twenty minutes they arrived at the Palais de Justice. M. Segmuller did not seem to be immoderately surprised by Lecoq's revelations, though he listened with evident doubt to the young police agent's ingenious deductions; it was the circumstance of the starling which at last decided him. "Perhaps you are right, my dear Lecoq," he said, "and to tell the truth, I quite agree with you. But I can take no further action in the matter until you can furnish proof so convincing in its nature that the Duc de Sairmeuse will be unable to think of denying it."

"Ah! my superiors won't allow me—"

"On the contrary," interrupted the magistrate, "they will allow you the fullest liberty after I have spoken to them." Such action on M. Segmuller's part required no little courage; for in official circles there had been considerable merriment over the magistrate's mysterious man with the iron mask, disguised as a mountebank; and the former by his persistent support of the young detective's theories had almost become an object of ridicule.

"And when will you speak to them?" timidly inquired Lecoq.

"At once."

The magistrate had already turned toward the door when the young police agent stopped him. "I have one more favor to ask you, sir," he said, entreatingly. "You are so kind, you are the first person who has given me any encouragement—who has had any faith in me."

"Speak, my good fellow."

"Ah! sir, will you give me a message for M. d'Escorval? Any insignificant message—inform him of the prisoner's escape. I will take it myself, and then— Oh! fear nothing, sir; I will be very prudent."

"Very well!" replied the magistrate, "I will write him a note."

When he finally left the office, Lecoq was fully authorized to proceed with his investigations, and he carried in his pocket M. Segmuller's letter to M. d'Escorval. His satisfaction was so intense that he did not deign to notice the sneers bestowed upon him as he passed along the corridors; but on the threshold downstairs he encountered Gevrol, the general, who was evidently watching for him. "Ah, ha!" laughed the inspector.

as Lecoq passed out, "here's one of those simpletons who fish for whales and don't even catch a gudgeon."

For an instant Lecoq felt angry. He turned round abruptly and looked Gevrol full in the face. "At all events," retorted he in the tone of a man who knows what he's saying, "that's better than assisting prisoners to carry on a surreptitious correspondence with people outside."

In his surprise, Gevrol almost lost countenance, and his blush was equivalent to a confession. But Lecoq did not add another word. What did it matter to him now if Gevrol had betrayed him! Was he not about to win a glorious revenge!

He spent the remainder of the day in preparing his plan of action, and in thinking what he should say when he took M. Segmuller's note to Maurice d'Escorval. The next morning, at about eleven o'clock, he presented himself at the latter's house. "M. d'Escorval is in his study with a young man," replied the servant to the young detective's inquiry, "but, as he gave me no orders to the contrary, you may go in."

Lecoq entered, but found the study unoccupied. From the adjoining room, however, only separated from the study by velvet hangings, came a sound of stifled exclamations, of sobs mingled with kisses. Not knowing whether to remain or to retire, the young police agent stood for a moment undecided; when suddenly he perceived an open letter lying on the carpet. Impelled by an impulse stronger than his will, Lecoq picked the letter up, and his eyes meeting the signature, he started back in surprise. He could not now refrain from reading this missive, which ran as follows:

"The bearer of this letter is Marie-Anne's son—your son, Maurice. I have given him all the proofs necessary to establish his identity. It was to his education that I consecrated poor Marie-Anne's inheritance. Those to whose care I confided him have made a noble man of him. If I restore him to you, it is only because the life I lead is not a fitting life for him. Yesterday, the miserable woman who murdered my sister died from poison administered by her own hand. Poor Marie-Anne! she would have been far more terribly avenged had not an accident which happened to me saved the Duc and the Duchesse de Sairmeuse from the snare into which I had drawn them.

JEAN LACHENEUR."

Lecoq stood as if petrified. Now he understood the terrible drama enacted in the Widow Chupin's cabin. "I must go to Sairmeuse at once," he said to himself; "there I can discover everything." He left the room without seeing M. d'Escorval, and even successfully resisted the temptation to take Lacheneur's letter with him.

Exactly a month had transpired since Blanche's death. His grace the Duc de Sairmeuse was reclining on a divan in his library, reading one of his favorite authors, when Otto, his valet de chambre, came in to inform him that a messenger was below, charged with delivering into his grace's own hands a letter from M. d'Escorval.

Martial sprang to his feet. "It is impossible," he exclaimed; and then he quickly added: "Let the messenger come up."

A tall man, with florid complexion, and red hair and beard, timidly handed the duke a letter. Martial instantly broke the seal, and read:

"I saved you, monsieur, by not recognizing the prisoner, May. In your turn assist me. By noon on the day after to-morrow, I must have two hundred and sixty thousand francs. I have sufficient confidence in your honor to apply to you.

"MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

For a moment Martial stood bewildered, then springing to a table he began writing, without noticing that the messenger was looking over his shoulder: "Monsieur—Not the day after to-morrow, but this evening, what you ask will be at your service. My fortune and my life are at your disposal. It is but a slight return for the generosity shown by you in withdrawing, when, under the rags of May, you recognized your former enemy, but now your devoted friend.

"MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

The duke folded this letter with a feverish hand, and giving it to the messenger with a louis, he said: "Here is the answer, make haste!"

But the messenger did not stir. He slipped the letter into his pocket, and then hastily cast his red beard and wig on the floor.

"Lecoq!" exclaimed Martial, paler than death.

"Lecoq, yes, sir," replied the young detective. "I was obliged

to take my revenge; my future depended on it, and so I ventured to imitate M. d'Escorval's writing." And as Martial offered no remark: "I must also say to Monsieur le Duc," he continued, "that if your grace will transmit a confession of your presence at the Poivriere in your own handwriting to the investigating magistrate I can and will at the same time furnish proofs of your grace's innocence—that you were dragged into a snare, and that you only acted in self-defense."

Martial looked up in fair astonishment, but to show that he was acquainted with everything, Lecoq slowly added: "As madame is dead, there will be nothing said concerning what took place at the Borderie."

A week later a private report setting forth that there were no grounds to proceed against the Duc de Sairmeuse was forwarded by M. Segmuller to the public prosecutor.

Appointed to the position of inspector, which he coveted, Lecoq had the good taste, or perhaps, the shrewdness, to wear his honors modestly. But on the day of his promotion, he ordered a seal, on which was engraved the exultant rooster, his chosen armorial design, with a motto to which he ever remained faithful: *"Semper Vigilans."*

THE END

THE LEROUGE AFFAIR

THE LEROUGE AFFAIR

ON Thursday, the 6th of March, 1862, two days after Shrove Tuesday, five women belonging to the village of La Jonchere presented themselves at the police station, at Bougival. They stated that for two days past no one had seen the Widow Lerouge, one of their neighbors, who lived by herself in an isolated cottage. They had several times knocked at the door, but all in vain. The window-shutters as well as the door were closed; and it was impossible to obtain even a glimpse of the interior. This silence, this sudden disappearance, alarmed them. Apprehensive of a crime, or at least of an accident, they requested the interference of the police to satisfy their doubts by forcing the door and entering the house.

Bougival is a pleasant riverside village, peopled on Sundays by crowds of boating parties. Trifling offenses are frequently heard of in its neighborhood, but crimes are rare. The commissary of police at first refused to listen to the women, but their importunities so fatigued him that he at length acceded to their request. He sent for the corporal of gendarmes, with two of his men, called into requisition the services of a locksmith, and, thus accompanied, followed the neighbors of the Widow Lerouge.

La Jonchere owes some celebrity to the inventor of the sliding railway, who for some years past has, with more enterprise than profit, made public trials of his system in the immediate neighborhood. It is a hamlet of no importance, resting upon the slope of the hill which overlooks the Seine between La Malmaison and Bougival. It is about twenty minutes' walk from the main road, which, passing by Rueil and Port-Marly, goes from Paris to St. Germain; and is reached by a steep and rugged lane, quite unknown to the government engineers.

The party, led by the gendarmes, followed the main road which here bordered the river until it reached this lane, into which it turned, and stumbled over the rugged inequalities of the

ground for about a hundred yards, when it arrived in front of a cottage of extremely modest yet respectable appearance. This cottage had probably been built by some little Parisian shopkeeper in love with the beauties of nature; for all the trees had been carefully cut down. It consisted merely of two apartments on the ground floor with a loft above. Around it extended a much-neglected garden, badly protected against midnight prowlers by a very dilapidated stone wall about three feet high, and broken and crumbling in many places. A light wooden gate, clumsily held in its place by pieces of wire, gave access to the garden.

"It is here," said the women.

The commissary stopped. During his short walk, the number of his followers had been rapidly increasing, and now included all the inquisitive and idle persons of the neighborhood. He found himself surrounded by about forty individuals burning with curiosity.

"No one must enter the garden," said he; and, to insure obedience, he placed the two gendarmes on sentry before the entrance, and advanced toward the house, accompanied by the corporal and the locksmith.

He knocked several times loudly with his leaded cane, first at the door, and then successively at all the window-shutters. After each blow, he placed his ear against the wood and listened. Hearing nothing, he turned to the locksmith.

"Open!" said he.

The workman unstrapped his satchel, and produced his implements. He had already introduced a skeleton key into the lock, when a loud exclamation was heard from the crowd outside the gate.

"The key!" they cried. "Here is the key!"

A boy about twelve years old, playing with one of his companions, had seen an enormous key in a ditch by the roadside; he had picked it up and carried it to the cottage in triumph.

"Give it to me, youngster," said the corporal. "We shall see."

The key was tried, and it proved to be the key of the house. The commissary and the locksmith exchanged glances full of sinister misgivings. "This looks bad," muttered the corporal. They entered the house, while the crowd, restrained with difficulty by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, or leaned

over the garden wall, stretching their necks eagerly, to see or hear something of what was passing within the cottage.

Those who anticipated the discovery of a crime were unhappily not deceived. The commissary was convinced of this as soon as he crossed the threshold. Everything in the first room pointed with a sad eloquence to the recent presence of a malefactor. The furniture was knocked about, and a chest of drawers and two large trunks had been forced and broken open. In the inner room, which served as a sleeping apartment, the disorder was even greater. It seemed as though some furious hand had taken a fiendish pleasure in upsetting everything. Near the fireplace, her face buried in the ashes, lay the dead body of Widow Lerouge. All one side of the face and the hair were burnt; it seemed a miracle that the fire had not caught her clothing.

"Wretches!" exclaimed the corporal. "Could they not have robbed without assassinating the poor woman?"

"But where has she been wounded?" inquired the commissary; "I do not see any blood."

"Look! here between the shoulders," replied the corporal; two fierce blows, by my faith. I'll wager my stripes she had no time to cry out."

He stooped over the corpse and touched it. "She is quite cold," he continued, "and it seems to me that she is no longer very stiff. It is at least thirty-six hours since she received her death-blow."

The commissary began writing, on the corner of a table, a short official report. "We are not here to talk, but to discover the guilty," said he to the corporal. "Let information be at once conveyed to the justice of the peace and the mayor, and send this letter without delay to the Palais de Justice. In a couple of hours an investigating magistrate can be here. In the mean while, I will proceed to make a preliminary inquiry."

"Shall I carry the letter?" asked the corporal of gendarmes.

"No, send one of your men; you will be useful to me here in keeping these people in order, and in finding any witnesses I may want. We must leave everything here as it is. I will install myself in the other room."

A gendarme departed at a run toward the station at Rueil; and the commissary commenced his investigations in regular form, as prescribed by law.

"Who was Widow Lerouge? Where did she come from?

What did she do? Upon what means, and how did she live? What were her habits, her morals, and what sort of company did she keep? Was she known to have enemies? Was she a miser? Did she pass for being rich?" The commissary knew the importance of ascertaining all this: but although the witnesses were numerous enough, they possessed but little information. The depositions of the neighbors, successively interrogated, were empty, incoherent, and incomplete. No one knew anything of the victim, who was a stranger in the country. Many presented themselves as witnesses, moreover, who came forward less to afford information than to gratify their curiosity. A gardener's wife, who had been friendly with the deceased, and a milkwoman with whom she dealt, were alone able to give a few insignificant though precise details. In a word, after three hours of laborious investigation, after having undergone the infliction of all the gossip of the country, after receiving evidence the most contradictory, and listening to commentaries the most ridiculous, the following is what appeared the most reliable to the commissary:

Twelve years before, at the beginning of 1850, the woman Lerouge had made her appearance at Bougival with a large wagon piled with furniture, linen, and her personal effects. She had alighted at an inn, declaring her intention of settling in the neighborhood, and had immediately gone in quest of a house. Finding this one unoccupied, and thinking it would suit her, she had taken it without trying to beat down the terms, at a rental of three hundred and twenty francs, payable half yearly and in advance, but had refused to sign a lease. The house taken, she occupied it the same day, and expended about a hundred francs on repairs.

She was a woman about fifty-four or fifty-five years of age, well preserved, active, and in the enjoyment of excellent health. No one knew her reasons for taking up her abode in a country where she was an absolute stranger. She was supposed to have come from Normandy, having been frequently seen in the early morning to wear a white cotton cap. This night-cap did not prevent her dressing very smartly during the day; indeed, she ordinarily wore very handsome dresses, very showy ribbons in her caps, and covered herself with jewels like a saint in a chapel. Without doubt she lived on the coast, for ships and the sea recurred incessantly in her conversation.

She did not like speaking of her husband, who had, she said,

perished in a shipwreck. But she had never given the slightest detail. On one particular occasion she had remarked, in presence of the milkwoman and three other persons: "No woman was ever more miserable than I during my married life." And at another she had said: "All new, all fine! My defunct husband only loved me for a year!"

Widow Lerouge passed for rich, or at least for being very well off, and she was not a miser. She had lent a woman at La Malmaison sixty francs with which to pay her rent, and would not let her return them. At another time she had advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port-Marly. She was fond of good living, spent a good deal on her food, and bought wine by the half-cask. She took pleasure in treating her acquaintances, and her dinners were excellent. If complimented on her easy circumstances, she made no very strong denial. She had frequently been heard to say: "I have nothing in the funds, but I have everything I want. If I wished for more, I could have it."

Beyond this, the slightest allusion to her past life, her country, or her family had never escaped her. She was very talkative, but all she would say would be to the detriment of her neighbors. She was supposed, however, to have seen the world, and to know a great deal. She was very distrustful and barricaded herself in her cottage as in a fortress. She never went out in the evening, and it was well known that she got tipsy regularly at her dinner and went to bed very soon afterward.

Rarely had strangers been seen to visit her; four or five times a lady accompanied by a young man had called, and upon one occasion two gentlemen, one young, the other old and decorated, had come in a magnificent carriage.

In conclusion, the deceased was held in but little esteem by her neighbors. Her remarks were often most offensive and odious in the mouth of a woman of her age. She had been heard to give a young girl the most detestable counsels. A pork butcher, belonging to Bougival, embarrassed in his business, and tempted by her supposed wealth, had at one time paid her his addresses. She, however, repelled his advances, declaring that to be married once was enough for her. On several occasions men had been seen in her house: first of all, a young one, who had the appearance of a clerk of the railway company: then another, a tall, elderly man, very sunburnt, who

was dressed in a blouse, and looked very villainous. These men were reported to be her lovers.

While questioning the witnesses, the commissary wrote down their depositions in a more condensed form, and he had got so far, when the investigating magistrate arrived, attended by the chief of the detective police, and one of his subordinates. M. Daburon was a man thirty-eight years of age, and of prepossessing appearance; sympathetic notwithstanding his coldness; wearing upon his countenance a sweet and rather sad expression. This settled melancholy had remained with him ever since his recovery, two years before, from a dreadful malady, which had well-nigh proved fatal. Investigating magistrate since 1859, he had rapidly acquired the most brilliant reputation. Laborious, patient, and acute, he knew with singular skill how to disentangle the skein of the most complicated affair, and from the midst of a thousand threads lay hold of the right one. None better than he, armed with an implacable logic, could solve those terrible problems in which x represents the criminal. Clever in deducing the unknown from the known, he excelled in collecting facts, and in uniting in a bundle of overwhelming proofs circumstances the most trifling, and in appearance the most insignificant.

Although possessed of qualifications for his office so numerous and valuable, he was tremblingly distrustful of his own abilities and exercised his terrible functions with diffidence and hesitation. He wanted audacity to risk those sudden surprises so often resorted to by his colleagues in the pursuit of truth. Thus it was repugnant to his feelings to deceive even an accused person, or to lay snares for him: in fact, the mere idea of the possibility of a judicial error terrified him. They said of him in the courts: "He is a trembler." What he sought was not conviction, nor the most probable presumptions, but the most absolute certainty. No rest for him until the day when the accused was forced to bow before the evidence; so much so that he had been jestingly reproached with seeking not to discover criminals but innocents.

The chief of detective police was none other than the celebrated Gevrol. He was really an able man, but wanting in perseverance, and liable to be blinded by an incredible obstinacy. If he lost a clue, he could not bring himself to acknowledge it, still less to retrace his steps. His audacity and coolness, however, rendered it impossible to disconcert him; and being pos-

sessed of immense personal strength, hidden under a most meagre appearance, he never hesitated to confront the most daring of malefactors. But his specialty, his triumph, his glory, was a memory of faces, so prodigious as to exceed belief. If he saw a face for five minutes, it was enough. Its possessor was catalogued, and would be recognized at any time. The impossibilities of place, the unlikelihood of circumstances, the most incredible disguises would not lead him astray. The reason for this, so he pretended, was because he only looked at a man's eyes, without noticing any other features. This faculty was severly tested some months back at Poissy by the following experiment. Three prisoners were draped in coverings so as to completely disguise their height. Over their faces were thick veils, allowing nothing of the features to be seen except the eyes, for which holes had been made; and in this state they were shown to Gevrol. Without the slightest hesitation he recognized the prisoners and named them. Had chance alone assisted him?

The subordinate Gevrol had brought with him was an old offender, reconciled to the law. A smart fellow in his profession, crafty as a fox, and jealous of his chief, whose abilities he held in light estimation. His name was Lecoq.

The commissary, by this time heartily tired of his responsibilities, welcomed the investigating magistrate and his agents as liberators. He rapidly related the facts collected and read his official report.

"You have proceeded very well," observed the investigating magistrate. "All is stated clearly; yet there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain."

"What is that, sir?" inquired the commissary.

"On what day was Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what hour?"

"I was coming to that presently. She was last seen and spoken to on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, at twenty minutes past five. She was then returning from Bougival with a basketful of purchases."

"You are sure of the hour, sir?" inquired Gevrol.

"Perfectly, and for this reason; the two witnesses who furnished me with this fact, a woman named Tellier and a cooper who lives hard by, alighted from the omnibus which leaves Marly every hour, when they perceived the widow in the cross-road, and hastened to overtake her. They conversed with her

and only left her when they reached the door of her own house."

"And what had she in her basket?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"The witnesses can not say. They only know that she carried two sealed bottles of wine, and another of brandy. She complained to them of headache, and said: 'Though it is customary to enjoy one's self on Shrove Tuesday, I am going to bed.'"

"So, so!" exclaimed the chief of detective police. "I know where to search!"

"You think so?" inquired M. Daburon.

"Why, it is clear enough. We must find the tall, sunburnt man, the gallant in the blouse. The brandy and the wine were intended for his entertainment. The widow expected him to supper. He came, sure enough, the amiable gallant!"

"Oh!" cried the corporal of gendarmes, evidently scandalized, "she was very old, and terribly ugly!"

Gevrol surveyed the honest fellow with an expression of contemptuous pity. "Know, corporal," said he, "that a woman who has money is always young and pretty, if she desires to be thought so!"

"Perhaps there is something in that," remarked the magistrate; "but it is not what strikes me most. I am more impressed by the remark of this unfortunate woman: 'If I wished for more, I could have it.'"

"That also attracted my attention," acquiesced the commissary.

But Gevrol no longer took the trouble to listen. He stuck to his own opinion, and began to inspect minutely every corner of the room. Suddenly he turned toward the commissary. "Now that I think of it," cried he, "was it not on Tuesday that the weather changed? It had been freezing for a fortnight past, and on that evening it rained. At what time did the rain commence here?"

"At half-past nine," answered the corporal. "I went out from supper to make my circuit of the dancing halls, when I was overtaken opposite the Rue des Pecheurs by a heavy shower. In less than ten minutes there was half an inch of water in the road."

"Very well," said Gevrol. "Then if the man came after half-past nine his shoes must have been very muddy. If they were

dry, he arrived sooner. This must have been noticed, for the floor is a polished one. Were there any imprints of footsteps, Mr. Commissary?"

"I must confess we never thought of looking for them."

"Ah!" exclaimed the chief detective, in a tone of irritation, "that is vexatious!"

"Wait," added the commissary; "there is yet time to see if there are any, not in this room, but in the other. We have disturbed absolutely nothing there. My footsteps and the corporal's will be easily distinguished. Let us see."

As the commissary opened the door of the second chamber, Gevrol stopped him. "I ask permission, sir," said he to the investigating magistrate, "to examine the apartment before any one else is permitted to enter. It is very important for me."

"Certainly," approved M. Daburon.

Gevrol passed in first, the others remaining on the threshold. They all took in at a glance the scene of the crime. Everything, as the commissary had stated, seemed to have been overturned by some furious madman. In the middle of the room was a table covered with a fine linen cloth, white as snow. Upon this was placed a magnificent wineglass of the rarest manufacture, a very handsome knife, and a plate of the finest porcelain. There was an opened bottle of wine, hardly touched, and another of brandy, from which about five or six small glassfuls had been taken. On the right, against the wall, stood two handsome walnut-wood wardrobes, with ornamental locks; they were placed one on each side of the window; both were empty, and the contents scattered about on all sides. There were clothing, linen, and other effects unfolded, tossed about, and crumpled. At the end of the room, near the fireplace, a large cupboard used for keeping the crockery was wide open. On the other side of the fireplace, an old secretary with a marble top had been forced, broken, smashed into bits, and rummaged, no doubt, to its inmost recesses. The desk, wrenched away, hung by a single hinge. The drawers had been pulled out and thrown upon the floor. To the left of the room stood the bed, which had been completely disarranged and upset. Even the straw of the mattress had been pulled out and examined.

"Not the slightest imprint," murmured Gevrol, disappointed. "He must have arrived before half-past nine. You can all come in now."

He walked right up to the corpse of the widow, near which

he knelt. "It can not be said," grumbled he, "that the work is not properly done! the assassin is no apprentice!" Then looking right and left, he continued: "Oh! oh! the poor devil was busy with her cooking when he struck her; see her pan of ham and eggs upon the hearth. The brute hadn't patience enough to wait for the dinner. The gentleman was in a hurry, he struck the blow fasting; therefore he can't invoke the gaiety of dessert in his defense!"

"It is evident," said the commissary to the investigating magistrate, "that robbery was the motive of the crime."

"It is probable," answered Gevrol in a sly way; "and that accounts for the absence of the silver spoons from the table."

"Look here! Some pieces of gold in this drawer!" exclaimed Lecoq, who had been searching on his own account, "just three hundred and twenty francs!"

"Well, I never!" cried Gevrol, a little disconcerted. But he soon recovered from his embarrassment, and added: "He must have forgotten them; that often happens. I have known an assassin, who, after accomplishing the murder, became so utterly bewildered as to depart without remembering to take the plunder, for which he had committed the crime. Our man became excited perhaps, or was interrupted. Some one may have knocked at the door. What makes me more willing to think so is that the scamp did not leave the candle burning. You see, he took the trouble to put it out."

"Pooh!" said Lecoq. "That proves nothing. He is probably an economical and careful man."

The investigations of the two agents were continued all over the house; but their most minute researches resulted in discovering absolutely nothing; not one piece of evidence to convict; not the faintest indication which might serve as a point of departure. Even the dead woman's papers, if she possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, not a scrap of paper even, to be met with. From time to time Gevrol stopped to swear or grumble. "Oh! it is cleverly done! It is a tiptop piece of work! The scoundrel is a cool hand!"

"Well, what do you make of it?" at length demanded the investigating magistrate.

"It is a drawn game, monsieur," replied Gevrol. "We are baffled for the present. The miscreant has taken his measures with great precaution; but I will catch him. Before night, I shall have a dozen men in pursuit. Besides, he is sure to fall

into our hands. He has carried off the plate and the jewels. He is lost!"

"Despite all that," said M. Daburon, "we are no further advanced than we were this morning!"

"Well!" growled Gevrol, "a man can only do what he can!"

"Ah!" murmured Lecoq in a low tone, perfectly audible, however, "why is not old Tirauclair here?"

"What could he do more than we have done?" retorted Gevrol, directing a furious glance at his subordinate. Lecoq bowed his head and was silent, inwardly delighted at having wounded his chief.

"Who is old Tirauclair?" asked M. Daburon. "It seems to me that I have heard the name, but I can't remember where."

"He is an extraordinary man!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"He was formerly a clerk at the Mont de Piete," added Gevrol; "but he is now a rich old fellow, whose real name is Tabaret. He goes in for playing the detective by way of amusement."

"And to augment his revenues," insinuated the commissary.

"He?" cried Lecoq. "No danger of that. He works so much for the glory of success that he often spends money from his own pocket. It's his amusement, you see! At the Prefecture we have nicknamed him 'Tirauclair,' from a phrase he is constantly in the habit of repeating. Ah! he is sharp, the old weasel! It was he who in the case of that banker's wife, you remember, guessed that the lady had robbed herself, and who proved it."

"True!" retorted Gevrol; "and it was also he who almost had poor Dereme guillotined for killing his wife, a thorough bad woman; and all the while the poor man was innocent."

"We are wasting our time, gentlemen," interrupted M. Daburon. Then, addressing himself to Lecoq, he added: "Go and find M. Tabaret. I have heard a great deal of him, and shall be glad to see him at work here."

Lecoq started off at a run. Gevrol was seriously humiliated. "You have, of course, sir, the right to demand the services of whom you please," commenced he, "but yet—"

"Do not," interrupted M. Daburon, "let us lose our tempers, M. Gevrol. I have known you for a long time, and I know your worth; but to-day we happen to differ in opinion. You hold absolutely to your sunburnt man in the blouse, and I, on my side, am convinced that you are not on the right track!"

"I think I am right," replied the detective, "and I hope to prove it. I shall find the scoundrel, be he whom he may!"

"I ask nothing better," said M. Daburon.

"Only permit me, sir, to give—what shall I say without failing in respect—a piece of advice?"

"Speak!"

"I would advise you, sir, to distrust old Tabaret."

"Really? And for what reason?"

"The old fellow allows himself to be carried away too much by appearances. He has become an amateur detective for the sake of popularity, just like an author; and, as he is vainer than a peacock, he is apt to lose his temper and be very obstinate. As soon as he finds himself in the presence of a crime, like this one, for example, he pretends he can explain everything on the instant. And he manages to invent a story that will correspond exactly with the situation. He professes, with the help of one single fact, to be able to reconstruct all the details of an assassination, as a savant pictures an antediluvian animal from a single bone. Sometimes he divines correctly; very often, though, he makes a mistake. Take, for instance, the case of the tailor, the unfortunate Dereme, without me—"

"I thank you for your advice," interrupted M. Daburon, "and will profit by it. Now, commissary," he continued, "it is most important to ascertain from what part of the country Widow Lerouge came."

The procession of witnesses under the charge of the corporal of gendarmes were again interrogated by the investigating magistrate. But nothing new was elicited. It was evident that Widow Lerouge had been a singularly discreet woman; for, although very talkative, nothing in any way connected with her antecedents remained in the memory of the gossips of La Jonchere. All the people interrogated, however, obstinately tried to impart to the magistrate their own convictions and personal conjectures. Public opinion sided with Gevrol. Every voice denounced the tall sunburnt man with the gray blouse. He must surely be the culprit. Every one remembered his ferocious aspect, which had frightened the whole neighborhood. He had one evening menaced a woman, and another day beaten a child. They could point out neither the child nor the woman; but no matter: these brutal acts were notoriously public. M. Daburon began to despair of gaining the least enlightenment, when some one brought the wife of a grocer of Bougival, at whose shop

the victim used to deal, and a child thirteen years old, who knew, it was said, something positive.

The grocer's wife first made her appearance. She had heard Widow Lerouge speak of having a son still living.

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"As of my existence," answered the woman, "for, on that evening, yes, it was evening, she was, saving your presence, a little tipsy. She remained in my shop more than an hour."

"And what did she say?"

"I think I see her now," continued the shopkeeper: "she was leaning against the counter near the scales, jesting with a fisherman of Marly, old Husson, who can tell you the same; and she called him a fresh-water sailor. 'My husband,' said she, 'was a real sailor, and the proof is, he would sometimes remain years on a voyage, and always used to bring me back cocoanuts. I have a son who is also a sailor, like his dead father, in the imperial navy.'"

"Did she mention her son's name?"

"Not that time, but another evening, when she was, if I may say so, very drunk. She told us that her son's name was Jacques, and that she had not seen him for a very long time."

"Did she speak ill of her husband?"

"Never! She only said he was jealous and brutal, though a good man at bottom, and that he led her a miserable life. He was weak-headed, and forged ideas out of nothing at all. In fact, he was too honest to be wise."

"Did her son ever come to see her while she lived here?"

"She never told me of it."

"Did she spend much money with you?"

"That depends. About sixty francs a month; sometimes more, for she always buys the best brandy. She paid cash for all she bought."

The woman, knowing no more, was dismissed. The child, who was now brought forward, belonged to parents in easy circumstances. Tall and strong for his age, he had bright, intelligent eyes, and features expressive of watchfulness and cunning. The presence of the magistrate did not seem to intimidate him in the least.

"Let us hear, my boy," said M. Daburon, "what you know?"

"Well, sir, a few days ago, on Sunday last, I saw a man at Madame Lerouge's garden gate."

"At what time of the day?"

"Early in the morning. I was going to church, to serve in the second mass."

"Well," continued the magistrate, "and this man was tall and sunburnt, and dressed in a blouse?"

"No, sir; on the contrary, he was short, very fat, and old."

"You are sure you are not mistaken?"

"Quite sure," replied the urchin; "I saw him close face to face, for I spoke to him."

"Tell, me, then, what occurred?"

"Well, sir, I was passing when I saw this fat man at the gate. He appeared very much vexed, oh! but awfully vexed! His face was red, or rather purple, as far as the middle of his head, which I could see very well, for it was bare, and had very little hair on it."

"And did he speak to you first?"

"Yes, sir, he saw me, and called out, 'Halloa! youngster!' as I came up to him, and he asked me if I had got a good pair of legs. I answered yes. Then he took me by the ear, but without hurting me, and said: 'Since that is so, if you will run an errand for me, I will give you ten sous. Run as far as the Seine; and when you reach the quay, you will notice a large boat moored. Go on board, and ask to see Captain Gervais: he is sure to be there. Tell him that he can prepare to leave, that I am ready.' Then he put ten sous in my hand, and off I went."

"If all the witnesses were like this bright little fellow," murmured the commissary, "what a pleasure it would be!"

"Now," said the magistrate, "tell us how you executed your commission."

"I went to the boat, sir, found the man, and I told him; and that's all."

Gevrol, who had listened with the most lively attention, leaned over toward the ear of M. Daburon, and said in a low voice: "Will you permit me, sir, to ask the brat a few questions?"

"Certainly, M. Gevrol."

"Come now, my little friend," said Gevrol, "if you saw this man again, would you know him?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then there was something remarkable about him?"

"Yes, I should think so! his face was the color of a brick."

"And is that all?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"But you must remember how he was dressed; had he a blouse on?"

"No; he wore a jacket. Under the arms were very large pockets, and from out of one of them peeped a blue-spotted handkerchief."

"What kind of trousers had he on?"

"I do not remember."

"And his waistcoat?"

"Let me see," answered the child. "I don't think he wore a waistcoat. And yet—but no, I remember he did not wear one; he had a long cravat, fastened near his neck by a large ring."

"Ah!" said Gevrol with an air of satisfaction, "you are a bright boy; and I wager that if you try hard to remember you will find a few more details to give us."

The boy hung down his head and remained silent. From the knitting of his young brows it was plain he was making a violent effort of memory. "Yes," cried he suddenly, "I remember another thing."

"What?"

"The man wore very large rings in his ears."

"Bravo!" cried Gevrol, "here is a complete description. I shall find the fellow now. M. Daburon can prepare a warrant for his appearance whenever he likes."

"I believe, indeed, the testimony of this child is of the highest importance," said M. Daburon; and turning to the boy, added: "Can you tell us, my little friend, with what this boat was loaded?"

"No, sir, I couldn't see, because it was decked."

"Which way was she going, up the Seine or down?"

"Neither, sir; she was moored."

"We know that," said Gevrol. "The magistrate asks you which way the prow of the boat was turned—toward Paris or toward Marly?"

"The two ends of the boat seemed alike to me."

The chief of the detective police made a gesture of disappointment.

"At least," said he, addressing the child again, "you noticed

the name of the boat? you can read, I suppose. One should always know the names of the boats one goes aboard of."

"No, I didn't see any name," said the little boy.

"If this boat was moored at the quay," remarked M. Daburon, "it was probably noticed by the inhabitants of Bougival."

"That is true, sir," approved the commissary.

"Yes," said Gevrol, "and the sailors must have come ashore. I shall find out all about it at the wine-shop. But what sort of a man was Gervais, the master, my little friend?"

"Like all the sailors hereabouts, sir."

The child was preparing to depart when M. Daburon recalled him.

"Before you go, my boy, tell me, have you spoken to any one of this meeting before to-day?"

"Yes, sir, I told all to mama when I got back from church, and gave her the ten sous."

"And you have told us the whole truth?" continued the magistrate. "You know that it is a very grave matter to attempt to impose on justice. She always finds it out, and it is my duty to warn you that she inflicts the most terrible punishment upon liars."

The little fellow blushed as red as a cherry, and held down his head.

"I see," pursued M. Daburon, "that you have concealed something from us. Don't you know that the police know everything?"

"Pardon! sir," cried the boy, bursting into tears; "pardon. Don't punish me, and I will never do so again."

"Tell us, then, how you have deceived us?"

"Well, sir, it was not ten sous that the man gave me; it was twenty sous. I only gave half to mama; and I kept the rest to buy marbles with."

"My little friend," said the investigating magistrate, "for this time I forgive you. But let it be a lesson for the remainder of your life. You may go now, and remember it is useless to try and hide the truth; it always comes to light!"

II

THE two last depositions awakened in M. Daburon's mind some slight gleams of hope. In the midst of darkness the humblest rushlight acquires brilliancy.

"I will go at once to Bougival, sir, if you approve of this step," suggested Gevrol.

"Perhaps you would do well to wait a little," answered M. Daburon. "This man was seen on Sunday morning; we will inquire into Widow Lerouge's movements on that day."

Three neighbors were called. They all declared that the widow had kept her bed all Sunday. To one woman who, hearing she was unwell, had visited her, she said: "Ah! I had last night a terrible accident." Nobody at the time attached any significance to these words.

"The man with the rings in his ears becomes more and more important," said the magistrate when the woman had retired. "To find him again is indispensable: you must see to this, M. Gevrol."

"Before eight days I shall have him," replied the chief of detective police, "if I have to search every boat on the Seine, from its source to the ocean. I know the name of the captain, Gervais. The navigation office will tell me something."

He was interrupted by Lecoq, who rushed into the house breathless. "Here is old Tabaret," he said. "I met him just as he was going out. What a man! He wouldn't wait for the train, but gave I don't know how much to a cabman; and we drove here in fifty minutes!"

Almost immediately a man appeared at the door whose aspect it must be admitted was not at all what one would have expected of a person who had joined the police for honor alone. He was certainly sixty years old, and did not look a bit younger. Short, thin, and rather bent, he leaned on the carved ivory handle of a stout cane. His round face wore that expression of perpetual astonishment, mingled with uneasiness, which has made the fortunes of two comic actors of the Palais Royal

Theatre. Scrupulously shaved, he presented a very short chin, large and good-natured lips, and a nose disagreeably elevated, like the broad end of one of Sax's horns. His eyes, of a dull gray, were small and red at the lids, and absolutely void of expression; yet they fatigued the observer by their insupportable restlessness. A few straight hairs shaded his forehead, which receded like that of a greyhound, and through their scantiness barely concealed his long, ugly ears. He was very comfortably dressed, clean as a new franc piece, displaying linen of dazzling whiteness, and wearing silk gloves and leather gaiters. A long and massive gold chain, very vulgar looking, was twisted thrice round his neck, and fell in cascades into the pocket of his waistcoat.

M. Tabaret, surnamed Tirauclair, stood at the threshold, and bowed almost to the ground, bending his old back into an arch, and in the humblest of voices asked: "The investigating magistrate has deigned to send for me?"

"Yes!" replied M. Daburon, adding under his breath; "and if you are a man of any ability, there is at least nothing to indicate it in your appearance."

"I am here," continued the old fellow, "completely at the service of justice."

"I wish to know," said M. Daburon, "whether you can discover some clue that will put us upon the track of the assassin. I will explain the—"

"Oh, I know enough of it!" interrupted old Tabaret. "Lecoq has told me the principal facts, just as much as I desire to know."

"Nevertheless—" commenced the commissary of police.

"If you will permit me, I prefer to proceed without receiving any details, in order to be more fully master of my own impressions. When one knows another's opinion it can't help influencing one's judgment. I will, if you please, at once commence my researches, with Lecoq's assistance."

As the old fellow spoke his little gray eyes dilated and became brilliant as carbuncles. His face reflected an internal satisfaction; even his wrinkles seemed to laugh. His figure became erect, and his step was almost elastic, as he darted into the inner chamber. He remained there about half an hour; then came out running, then reentered, and then again came out; once more he disappeared and reappeared again almost immediately. The magistrate could not help comparing him

to a pointer on the scent, his turned-up nose even moved about as if to discover some subtle odor left by the assassin. All the while he talked loudly and with much gesticulation, apostrophizing himself, scolding himself, uttering little cries of triumph or self-encouragement. He did not allow Lecoq to have a moment's rest. He wanted this or that or the other thing. He demanded paper and pencil. Then he wanted a spade; and finally he cried out for plaster of Paris, some water, and a bottle of oil. When more than an hour had elapsed, the investigating magistrate began to grow impatient, and asked what had become of the amateur detective.

"He is on the road," replied the corporal, "lying flat in the mud, and mixing some plaster in a plate. He says he has nearly finished, and that he is coming back presently."

He returned in fact almost instantly, joyous, triumphant, looking at least twenty years younger. Lecoq followed him, carrying with the utmost precaution a large basket. "I have solved the riddle!" said Tabaret to the magistrate. "It is all clear now, and as plain as noonday. Lecoq, my lad, put the basket on the table."

Gevrol at this moment returned from his expedition equally delighted. "I am on the track of the man with the earrings," said he; "the boat went down the river. I have obtained an exact description of the master Gervais."

"What have you discovered, M. Tabaret?" asked the magistrate.

The old fellow carefully emptied upon the table the contents of the basket—a big lump of clay, several large sheets of paper, and three or four small lumps of plaster yet damp. Standing behind this table, he presented a grotesque resemblance to those mountebank conjurers who in the public squares juggle the money of the lookers-on. His clothes had greatly suffered: he was covered with mud up to his chin. "In the first place," said he at last in a tone of affected modesty, "robbery has had nothing to do with the crime that occupies our attention."

"Oh! of course not!" muttered Gevrol.

"I shall prove it," continued old Tabaret, "by the evidence. By and by I shall offer my humble opinion as to the real motive. In the second place, the assassin arrived here before half-past nine; that is to say, before the rain fell. No more than M. Gevrol have I been able to discover traces of muddy footsteps; but under the table, on the spot where his feet rested, I find

dust. We are thus assured of the hour. The widow did not in the least expect her visitor. She had commenced undressing, and was winding up her cuckoo clock when he knocked."

"These are absolute details!" cried the commissary.

"But easily established," replied the amateur. "You see this cuckoo clock above the secretary: it is one of those which run fourteen or fifteen hours at most, for I have examined it. Now it is more than probable, it is certain, that the widow wound it up every evening before going to bed. How, then, is it that the clock has stopped at five? Because she must have touched it. As she was drawing the chain the assassin knocked. In proof, I show this chair standing under the clock, and on the seat a very plain footmark. Now look at the dress of the victim; the body of it is off. In order to open the door more quickly, she did not wait to put it on again, but hastily threw this old shawl over her shoulders.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the corporal, evidently struck.

"The widow," continued the old fellow, "knew the person who knocked. Her haste to open the door gives rise to this conjecture; what follows proves it. The assassin then gained admission without difficulty. He is a young man, a little above the middle height, elegantly dressed. He wore on that evening a high hat. He carried an umbrella, and smoked a trabucos cigar in a holder."

"Ridiculous!" cried Gevrol. "This is too much."

"Too much, perhaps," retorted old Tabaret. "At all events, it is the truth. If you are not minute in your investigations, I can not help it; anyhow, I am. I search, and I find. Too much, say you? Well deign to glance at these lumps of damp plaster. They represent the heels of the boots worn by the assassin, of which I found a most perfect impression near the ditch where the key was picked up. On these sheets of paper I have marked in outline the imprint of the foot which I can not take up, because it is on some sand. Look! heel high, instep pronounced, sole small and narrow—an elegant boot, belonging to a foot well cared for evidently. Look for this impression all along the path, and you will find it again twice. Then you will find it five times repeated in the garden where no one else had been; and these footprints prove, by the way, that the stranger knocked not at the door, but at the window-shutter, beneath which shone a gleam of light. At the entrance to the garden the man leaped to avoid a flower-bed! the point

of the foot, more deeply imprinted than usual, shows it. He leaped more than two yards with ease, proving that he is active, and therefore young."

Old Tabaret spoke in a low voice, clear and penetrating; and his eye glanced from one to the other of his auditors, watching the impression he was making. "Does the hat astonish you, M. Gevrol?" he pursued. "Just look at the circle traced in the dust on the marble top of the secretary. Is it because I have mentioned his height that you are surprised? Take the trouble to examine the tops of the wardrobes and you will see that the assassin passed his hands across them. Therefore he is taller than I am. Do not say that he got on a chair, for in that case he would have seen and would not have been obliged to feel. Are you astonished about the umbrella? This lump of earth shows an admirable impression not only of the end of the stick, but even of the little round piece of wood which is always placed at the end of the silk. Perhaps you can not get over the statement that he smoked a cigar? Here is the end of a trabucos that I found among the ashes. Has the end been bitten? No. Has it been moistened with saliva? No. Then he who smoked it used a cigar-holder."

Lecoq was unable to conceal his enthusiastic admiration, and noiselessly rubbed his hands together. The commissary appeared stupefied, while M. Daburon was delighted. Gevrol's face, on the contrary, was sensibly elongated. As for the corporal, he was overwhelmed.

"Now," continued the old fellow, "follow me closely. We have traced the young man into the house. How he explained his presence at this hour, I do not know; this much is certain, he told the widow he had not dined. The worthy woman was delighted to hear it, and at once set to work to prepare a meal. This meal was not for herself; for in the cupboard I have found the remains of her own dinner. She had dined off fish; the autopsy will confirm the truth of this statement. Besides you can see yourselves, there is but one glass on the table and one knife. But who is this young man? Evidently the widow looked upon him as a man of superior rank to her own; for in the cupboard is a table-cloth still very clean. Did she use it? No. For her guest she brought out a clean linen one, her very best. It is for him this magnificent glass, a present, no doubt, and it is evident she did not often use this knife with the ivory handle."

"That is all true," murmured M. Daburon, "very true."

"Now then we have got the young man seated. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow was putting her pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he asked for brandy, and swallowed about five small glassfuls. After an internal struggle of ten minutes (the time it must have taken to cook the ham and eggs as much as they are), the young man arose and approached the widow, who was squatting down and leaning forward over her cooking. He stabbed her twice in the back; but she was not killed instantly. She half arose seizing the assassin by the hands; while he drew back, lifting her suddenly, and then hurling her down in the position in which you see her. This short struggle is indicated by the posture of the body; for, squatting down and being struck in the back, it is naturally on her back that she ought to have fallen.

"The murderer used a sharp narrow weapon, which was, unless I am deceived, the end of a foil, sharpened, and with the button broken off. By wiping the weapon upon his victim's skirt, the assassin leaves us this indication. He was not, however, hurt in the struggle. The victim must have clung with a death-grip to his hands; but, as he had not taken off his lavender kid gloves—"

"Why this is romance," exclaimed Gevrol.

"Have you examined the dead woman's finger-nails, M. Gevrol? No. Well, do so, and then tell me whether I am mistaken. The woman, now dead, we come to the object of her assassination. What did this well-dressed young gentleman want? Money? Valuables? No! no! a hundred times no! What he wanted, what he sought, and what he found, were papers, documents, letters, which he knew to be in the possession of the victim. To find them, he overturned everything, upset the cupboards, unfolded the linen, broke open the secretary, of which he could not find the key, and even emptied the mattress of the bed. At last he found these documents. And then do you know what he did with them? Why, burned them, of course; not in the fire-place, but in the little stove in the front room. His end accomplished, what does he do next? He flies, carrying with him all that he finds valuable, to baffle detection, by suggesting a robbery. He wrapped everything he found worth taking in the napkin which was to have served him at dinner, and blowing out the candle, he fled, locking the

door on the outside, and throwing the key into a ditch. And that is all."

"M. Tabaret," said the magistrate, "your investigation is admirable; and I am persuaded your inferences are correct."

"Ah!" cried Lecoq, "is he not colossal, my old Tirauclair?"

"Pyramidal!" cried Gevrol ironically. "I fear, however, your well-dressed young man must have been just a little embarrassed in carrying a bundle covered with a snow white napkin, which could be so easily seen from a distance."

"He did not carry it a hundred leagues," responded old Tabaret. "You may well believe, that, to reach the railway station, he was not fool enough to take the omnibus. No, he returned on foot by the shortest way, which borders the river. Now on reaching the Seine, unless he is more knowing than I take him to be, his first care was to throw this telltale bundle into the water."

"Do you believe so, M. Tirauclair?" asked Gevrol.

"I don't mind making a bet on it; and the best evidence of my belief is, that I have sent three men, under the surveillance of a gendarme, to drag the Seine at the nearest spot from here. If they succeed in finding the bundle, I have promised them a recompense."

"Out of your own pocket, old enthusiast?"

"Yes, M. Gevrol, out of my own pocket."

"If they should, however, find this bundle!" murmured M. Daburon.

He was interrupted by the entrance of a gendarme, who said: "Here is a soiled table-napkin, filled with plate, money, and jewels, which these men have found; they claim the hundred francs' reward, promised them."

Old Tabaret took from his pocket-book a bank-note, which he handed to the gendarme. "Now," demanded he, crushing Gevrol with one disdainful glance, "what thinks the investigating magistrate after this?"

"That, thanks to your remarkable penetration, we shall discover, and—"

He did not finish. The doctor summoned to make the post-mortem examination entered the room. That unpleasant task accomplished, it only confirmed the assertions and conjectures of old Tabaret. The doctor explained, as the old man had done, the position of the body. In his opinion also, there had been a struggle. He pointed out a bluish circle, hardly per-

ceptible, round the neck of the victim, produced apparently by the powerful grasp of the murderer; finally he declared that Widow Lerouge had eaten about three hours before being struck.

Nothing now remained except to collect the different objects which would be useful for the prosecution, and might at a later period confound the culprit. Old Tabaret examined with extreme care the dead woman's finger nails; and, using infinite precaution, he even extracted from behind them several small particles of kid. The largest of these pieces was not above the twenty-fifth part of an inch in length; but all the same their color was easily distinguishable. He put aside also the part of the dress upon which the assassin had wiped his weapon. These with the bundle recovered from the Seine, and the different casts taken by the old fellow, were all the traces the murderer had left behind him. It was not much; but this little was enormous in the eyes of M. Daburon; and he had strong hopes of discovering the culprit. The greatest obstacle to success in the unraveling of mysterious crimes is in mistaking the motive. If the researches take at the first step a false direction, they are diverted further and further from the truth, in proportion to the length they are followed. Thanks to old Tabaret, the magistrate felt confident that he was on the right path.

Night had come on. M. Daburon had now nothing more to do at La Jonchere; but Gevrol, who still clung to his own opinion of the guilt of the man with the rings in his ears, declared he would remain at Bougival. He determined to employ the evening in visiting the different wine-shops, and finding, if possible, new witnesses. At the moment of departure, after the commissary and the entire party had wished M. Daburon good night, the latter asked M. Tabaret to accompany him.

"I was about to solicit that honor," replied the old fellow. They set out together; and naturally the crime which had been discovered, and with which they were mutually preoccupied, formed the subject of their conversation.

"Shall we, or shall we not, ascertain the antecedents of this woman!" repeated old Tabaret. "All depends upon that now!"

"We shall ascertain them, if the grocer's wife has told the truth," replied M. Daburon. "If the husband of Widow Lerouge was a sailor, and if her son Jacques is in the navy, the

minister of marine can furnish information that will soon lead to their discovery. I will write to the minister this very night."

They reached the station at Rueil, and took their places in the train. They were fortunate enough to secure a first-class carriage to themselves. But old Tabaret was no longer disposed for conversation. He reflected, he sought, he combined; and in his face might easily be read the working of his thoughts. M. Daburon watched him curiously and felt singularly attracted by this eccentric old man, whose very original taste had led him to devote his services to the secret police of the Rue de Jerusalem. "M. Tabaret," he suddenly asked, "have you been long associated with the police?"

"Nine years, M. Daburon, more than nine years; and permit me to confess I am a little surprised that you have never before heard of me."

"I certainly knew you by reputation," answered M. Daburon; "but your name did not occur to me, and it was only in consequence of hearing you praised that I had the excellent idea of asking your assistance. But what, I should like to know, is your reason for adopting this employment?"

"Sorrow, sir, loneliness, weariness. Ah! I have not always been happy!"

"I have been told, though, that you are rich."

The old fellow heaved a deep sigh, which revealed the most cruel deceptions. "I am well off, sir," he replied; "but I have not always been so. Until I was forty-five years old, my life was a series of absurd and useless privations. I had a father who wasted my youth, ruined my life, and made me the most pitiable of human creatures."

There are men who can never divest themselves of their professional habits. M. Daburon was at all times and seasons more or less an investigating magistrate. "How, M. Tabaret?" he inquired; "your father the author of all your misfortunes?"

"Alas, yes, sir! I have forgiven him at last; but I used to curse him heartily. In the first transports of my resentment, I heaped upon his memory all the insults that can be inspired by the most violent hatred, when I learnt . . . . But I will confide my history to you, M. Daburon. When I was five and twenty years of age, I was earning two thousand francs a year, as a clerk at the Monte de Piete. One morning my father

entered my lodging, and abruptly announced to me that he was ruined, and without food or shelter. He appeared in dispair, and talked of killing himself. I loved my father. Naturally, I strove to reassure him; I boasted of my situation, and explained to him as some length, that, while I earned the means for living, he should want for nothing; and, to commence, I insisted that henceforth we should live together. No sooner said than done, and during twenty years I was encumbered with the old—"

"What! you repent of your admirable conduct, M. Tabaret?"

"Do I repent of it! That is to say he deserved to be poisoned by the bread I gave him."

M. Daburon was unable to repress a gesture of surprise, which did not escape the old fellow's notice.

"Hear, before you condemn me," he continued. "There was I at twenty-five, imposing upon myself the severest privations for the sake of my father,—no more friends, no more flirtations, nothing. In the evenings, to augment our scanty revenues, I worked at copying law papers for a notary. I denied myself even the luxury of tobacco. Notwithstanding this, the old fellow complained without ceasing; he regretted his lost fortune; he must have pocket-money, with which to buy this, or that; my utmost exertions failed to satisfy him. Ah, Heaven alone knows what I suffered. I was not born to live alone and grow old like a dog. I longed for the pleasures of a home and a family. My dream was to marry, to adore a good wife, by whom I might be loved a little, and to see innocent healthy little ones gamboling about my knees. But pshaw! when such thoughts entered my heart and forced a tear or two from my eyes, I rebelled against myself. I said: 'My lad, when you earn but three thousand francs a year, and have an old and cherished father to support, it is your duty to stifle such desires, and remain a bachelor.' And yet I met a young girl. It is thirty years now since that time; well! just look at me, I am sure I am blushing as red as a tomato. Her name was Hortense. Who can tell what has become of her! She was beautiful and poor. Well, I was quite an old man when my father died, the wretch, the—"

"M. Tabaret!" interrupted the magistrate, "for shame, M. Tabaret!"

"But I have already told you, I have forgiven him, sir. However you will soon understand my anger. On the day of

his death, looking in his secretary, I found a memorandum of an income of twenty thousand francs!"

"How so! was he rich?"

"Yes, very rich; for that was not all; he owned near Orleans a property leased for six thousand francs a year. He owned, besides, the house I now live in, where we lived together; and I, fool, sot, imbecile, stupid animal that I was, used to pay the rent every three months to the concierge!"

"That was too much!" M. Daburon could not help saying.

"Was it not, sir? I was robbing myself of my own money! To crown his hypocrisy, he left a will wherein he declared, in the name of the Holy Trinity, that he had no other aim in view, in thus acting, than my own advantage. He wished, so he wrote, to habituate me to habits of good order and economy, and keep me from the commission of follies. And I was forty-five years old, and for twenty years I had been reproaching myself if ever I spent a single sou uselessly. In short, he had speculated on my good heart, he had— Bah! on my word, it is enough to disgust the human race with filial piety!"

M. Tabaret's anger, albeit very real and justified, was so highly ludicrous, that M. Daburon had much difficulty to restrain his laughter, in spite of the real sadness of the recital.

"At least," said he, "this fortune must have given you pleasure."

"Not at all, sir, it came too late. Of what avail to have the bread when one has no longer the teeth? The marriageable age had passed. I resigned my situation, however, to make way for some one poorer than myself. At the end of a month I was sick and tired of life; and, to replace the affections that had been denied me, I resolved to give myself a passion, a hobby, a mania. I became a collector of books. You think, sir, perhaps that to take an interest in books a man must have studied, must be learned?"

"I know, dear M. Tabaret, that he must have money. I am acquainted with an illustrious bibliomaniac who may be able to read, but who is most certainly unable to sign his own name."

"This is very likely. I, too, can read; and I read all the books I bought. I collected all I could find which related, no matter how little to the police. Memoirs, reports, pamphlets, speeches, letters, novels—all suited me; and I devoured them. So much so, that little by little I became attracted toward the

mysterious power which, from the obscurity of the Rue de Jerusalem, watches over and protects society, which penetrates everywhere, lifts the most impervious veils, sees through every plot, divines what is kept hidden, knows exactly the value of a man, the price of a conscience, and which accumulates in its portfolios the most terrible, as well as the most shameful secrets! In reading the memoirs of celebrated detectives, more attractive to me than the fables of our best authors, I became inspired by an enthusiastic admiration for those men, so keen scented, so subtle, flexible as steel, artful and penetrating, fertile in expedients, who follow crime on the trail, armed with the law, through the brushwood of legality, as relentlessly as the savages of Cooper pursue their enemies in the depths of the American forests. The desire seized me to become a wheel of this admirable machine—a small assistance in the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence. I made the essay; and I found I did not succeed too badly."

"And does this employment please you?"

"I owe to it, sir, my liveliest enjoyments. Adieu weariness! since I have abandoned the search for books to the search for men. I shrug my shoulders when I see a foolish fellow pay twenty-five francs for the right of hunting a hare. What a prize! Give me the hunting of a man! *That,* at least, calls the faculties into play, and the victory is not inglorious! The game in my sport is equal to the hunter; they both possess intelligence, strength, and cunning. The arms are nearly equal. Ah! if people but knew the excitement of these games of hide and seek which are played between the criminal and the detective, everybody would be wanting employment at the office of the Rue de Jerusalem. The misfortune is, that the art is becoming lost. Great crimes are now so rare. The race of strong fearless criminals has given place to the mob of vulgar pick-pockets. The few rascals who are heard of occasionally are as cowardly as foolish. They sign their names to their misdeeds, and even leave their cards lying about. There is no merit in catching them. Their crime found out, you have only to go and arrest them."

"It seems to me, though," interrupted M. Daburon, smiling, "that our assassin is not such a bungler."

"He, sir, is an exception; and I shall have greater delight in tracking him. I will do everything for that, I will even compromise myself if necessary. For I ought to confess, M.

Daburon," added he, slightly embarrassed, "that I do not boast to my friends of my exploits; I even conceal them as carefully as possible. They would perhaps shake hands with me less warmly did they know that Tirauclair and Tabaret were one and the same."

Insensibly the crime became again the subject of conversation. It was agreed, that, the first thing in the morning, M. Tabaret should install himself at Bougival. He boasted that in eight days he should examine all the people round about. On his side M. Daburon promised to keep him advised of the least evidence that transpired, and recall him, if by any chance he should procure the papers of Widow Lerouge.

"To you, M. Tabaret," said the magistrate in conclusion, "I shall be always at home. If you have any occasion to speak to me, do not hesitate to come at night as well as during the day. I rarely go out, and you will always find me either at my home, Rue Jacob, or in my office at the Palais de Justice. I will give orders for your admittance whenever you present yourself."

The train entered the station at this moment. M. Daburon, having called a cab, offered a seat to M. Tabaret. The old fellow declined. "It is not worth while," he replied, "for I live, as I have had the honor of telling you, in the Rue St. Lazare, only a few steps from here."

"Till to-morrow, then!" said M. Daburon.

"Till to-morrow," replied old Tabaret; and he added, "We shall succeed."

III

M. TABARET'S house was in fact not more than four minutes' walk from the railway terminus of St. Lazare. It was a fine building carefully kept, and which probably yielded a fine income, though the rents were not too high. The old fellow found plenty of room in it. He occupied on the first floor, overlooking the street, some handsome apartments, well arranged and comfortably furnished, the principal of which was

his collection of books. He lived very simply from taste, as well as habit, waited on by an old servant, to whom on great occasions the concierge lent a helping hand.

No one in the house had the slightest suspicion of the avocations of the proprietor. Besides, even the humblest agent of police would be expected to possess a degree of acuteness for which no one gave M. Tabaret credit. Indeed, they mistook for incipient idiocy his continual abstraction of mind. It is true that all who knew him remarked the singularity of his habits. His frequent absences from home had given to his proceedings an appearance at once eccentric and mysterious. Never was young libertine more irregular in his habits than this old man. He came or failed to come home to his meals, ate it mattered not what or when. He went out at every hour of the day and night, often slept abroad, and even disappeared for entire weeks at a time. Then, too, he received the strangest visitors, odd-looking men of suspicious appearance, and fellows of ill-favored and sinister aspect. This irregular way of living had robbed the old fellow of much consideration. Many believed they saw in him a shameless libertine, who squandered his income in disreputable places. They would remark to one another: "Is it not disgraceful in a man of his age?" He was aware of all this tittle-tattle, and laughed at it. This did not, however, prevent many of his tenants from seeking his society and paying court to him. They would invite him to dinner, but he almost invariably refused.

He seldom visited but one person of the house, but with that one he was very intimate, so much so, indeed, that he was more often in her apartment than in his own. She was a widow lady, who for fifteen years had occupied an apartment on the third floor. Her name was Madame Gerdy, and she lived with her son Noel, whom she adored.

Noel Gerdy was a man thirty-three years of age, but looking older; tall and well made, he had a noble and intelligent face, large black eyes, and black hair which curled naturally. A barrister, he passed for having great talent, and greater industry, and had already gained a certain amount of notoriety. He was an obstinate worker, cold and meditative, though devoted to his profession, and affected, with some ostentation, perhaps, a great rigidity of principle, and austerity of manners.

In Madame Gerdy's apartment, old Tabaret felt himself quite at home. He considered her as a relation, and looked upon

Noel as a son. In spite of her fifty years, he had often thought of asking the hand of his charming widow, and was restrained less by the fear of a refusal than its consequence. To propose and to be rejected would sever the existing relations, so pleasurable to him. However, he had by his will, which was deposited with his notary, constituted this young barrister his sole legatee; with the single condition of founding an annual prize of two thousand francs to be bestowed on the police agent who during the year had unraveled the most obscure and mysterious crime.

Short as was the distance to his house, old Tabaret was a good quarter of an hour in reaching it. On leaving M. Daburon his thoughts reverted to the scene of the murder; and so blinded was the old fellow to external objects that he moved along the street, first jostled on the right, then on the left, by the busy passers-by, advancing one step and receding two. He repeated to himself for the fiftieth time the words uttered by Widow Lerouge, as reported by the milkwoman. "If I wished for any more, I could have it." . . . .

"All is in that," murmured he. "Widow Lerouge possessed some important secret, which persons rich and powerful had the strongest motives for concealing. She had them in her power, and that was her fortune. She made them sing to her tune; she probably went too far, and so they suppressed her. But of what nature was this secret, and how did she become possessed of it? Most likely she was in her youth a servant in some great family; and while there, she saw, heard, or discovered something. What? Evidently there is a woman at the bottom of it. Did she assist her mistress in some love intrigue? What more probable? And in that case the affair becomes even more complicated. Not only must the woman be found but her lover also; for it is the lover who has moved in this affair. He is, or I am greatly deceived, a man of noble birth. A person of inferior rank would have simply hired an assassin. This man has not hung back; he himself has struck the blow, and by that means avoiding the indiscretion or the stupidity of an accomplice. He is a courageous rascal, full of audacity and coolness, for the crime has been admirably executed. The fellow left nothing behind of a nature to compromise him seriously. But for me, Gevrol, believing in the robbery, would have seen nothing. Fortunately, however, I was there. . . . But yet it can be hardly that," continued the old man. "It must be

something worse than a mere love affair." Old Tabaret entered the porch of the house. The concierge, seated by the window of his lodge, saw him as he passed beneath the gas-lamp. "Ah," said he, "the proprietor has returned at last."

"So he has," replied his wife, "but it looks as though his princess would have nothing to do with him to-night. He seems more loose than ever."

"Is it not positively indecent?" said the concierge, "and isn't he in a state! His fair ones do treat him well! One of these fine mornings I shall have to take him to a lunatic asylum in a strait waistcoat."

"Look at him now!" interrupted his wife, "just look at him now, in the middle of the courtyard!"

The old fellow had stopped at the extremity of the porch. He had taken off his hat, and, while talking to himself, gesticulated violently. "No," said he, "I have not yet got hold of the clue, I am getting near it; but have not yet found it out."

He mounted the staircase, and rang his bell, forgetting that he had his latch-key in his pocket. His housekeeper opened the door. "What, is it you, sir," said she, "and at this hour!"

"What's that you say?" asked the old fellow.

"I say," replied the housekeeper, "that it is more than half-past eight o'clock. I thought you were not coming back this evening. Have you at least dined?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, fortunately I have kept your dinner warm. You can sit down to it at once."

Old Tabaret took his place at the table, and helped himself to soup, but mounting his hobby-horse again, he forgot to eat, and remained, his spoon in the air, as though suddenly struck by an idea.

"He is certainly touched in the head," thought Manette, the housekeeper. "Look at that stupid expression. Who in his senses would lead the life he does?" She touched him on the shoulder, and blawled in his ear, as if he were leaf: "You do not eat. Are you not hungry?"

"Yes, yes," muttered he, trying mechanically to escape the voice that sounded in his ears, "I am very hungry, for since the morning I have been obliged—" He interrupted himself, remaining with his mouth open, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"You were obliged—?" repeated Manette.

"Thunder!" cried he, raising his clenched fists toward the ceiling—"heaven's thunder! I have it!"

His movement was so violent and sudden that the housekeeper was a little alarmed, and retired to the further end of the dining-room, near the door. "Yes," continued he, "it is certain there is a child!"

Manette approached him quickly. "A child?" she asked in astonishment.

"What next!" cried he in a furious tone. "What are you doing there? Has your hardihood come to this that you pick up the words which escape me? Do me the pleasure to retire to your kitchen, and stay there until I call you."

"He is going crazy!" thought Manette, as she disappeared very quickly.

Old Tabaret resumed his seat. He hastily swallowed his soup which was completely cold. "Why," said he to himself, "did I not think of it before? Poor humanity! I am growing old, and my brain is worn out. For it is clear as day; the circumstances all point to that conclusion." He rang the bell placed on the table beside him; the servant reappeared. "Bring the roast," he said, "and leave me to myself."

"Yes," continued he, furiously carving a leg of *presale* mutton—"yes, there is a child, and here is his history! Widow Lerouge is in the service of a great lady, immensely rich. Her husband, a sailor probably, departs on a long voyage. The lady, who has a lover, finds herself enceinte. She confides in Widow Lerouge, and with her assistance is clandestinely confined."

He rang again. "Manette, bring the dessert, and then leave the room!"

Certainly such a master was unworthy of so excellent a cook. He would have been puzzled to say what he had eaten for his dinner, or even what he was eating at that moment; it was some preserved pears.

"But the child; what has become of the child?" murmured he. "Has it been destroyed? No; for Widow Lerouge, an accomplice in an infanticide, would be no longer formidable. The lover wished it to live, and it was confided to the care of our widow, by whom it has been reared. They have been able to take the child from her, but not the proofs of its birth and its existence. That's what bothered them. The father is the man with the fine carriage; the mother is no other than the woman

who came with the handsome young man. Ha! ha! I can well believe the dear old dame wanted for nothing! Some secrets are worth a farm in Brie. Two persons to fleece. It is true, though, that indulging in a lover, her expenses were bound to increase every year. Poor humanity! the heart has its wants. She turned the screw too much and it broke. She has threatened. They have been frightened, and said: 'Let's put a stop to it!' But who has been charged with the commission? The papa? No; he is too old. It is the son! of course. He wished to save his mother, the pretty boy! He has killed the widow and burned the proofs!"

Manette all this time had her ear to the keyhole, and listened intently. From time to time she gleaned a word, an oath, the noise of a blow upon the table; but that was all. "For certain," thought she, "he is worried about his women. They want him to believe he is a father." Her curiosity so overcame her prudence that, being no longer able to withstand the temptation, she ventured to open the door a little way. "Did you call for your coffee, sir?" she stammered timidly.

"No, but you may bring it to me," replied old Tabaret. He attempted to swallow it at a gulp, but scalded himself so severely that the pain brought him suddenly from speculation to reality.

"Thunder!" growled he: "but it is hot! Devil take the case! it has set me beside myself. They are right when they say I am too enthusiastic. But who among the whole lot of them could have, by the sole exercise of observation and reason, established the whole history of the assassination? Certainly not, Gevrol, poor man! Won't he feel vexed and humiliated, being altogether out of it. Shall I seek M. Daburon? No, not yet. The night is necessary to me to sift to the bottom all the particulars, and arrange my ideas systematically. But, on the other hand, if I sit here all alone, this confounded case will keep me in a fever of speculation, and as I have just eaten a great deal, I may get an attack of indigestion. My faith! I will call upon Madame Gerdy: she has been ailing for some days past. I will have a chat with Noel, and that will change the course of my ideas." He got up from the table, put on his overcoat, and took his hat and cane.

"Are you going out, sir?" asked Manette.

"Yes."

"Shall you be late?"

"Possibly."

"But you will return to-night?"

"I do not know." One minute later, M. Tabaret was ringing his friend's bell.

Madame Gerdy lived in respectable style. She possessed sufficient for her wants; and her son's practise, already large, had made them almost rich. She lived very quietly, and with the exception of one or two friends, whom Noel occasionally invited to dinner, received very few visitors. During more than fifteen years that M. Tabaret came familiarly to the apartments, he had only met the cure of the parish, one of Noel's old professors, and Madame Gerdy's brother, a retired colonel. When these three visitors happened to call on the same evening, an event somewhat rare, they played at a round game called Boston; on other evenings piquet or all-fours was the rule. Noel, however, seldom remained in the drawing-room, but shut himself up after dinner in his study, which with his bedroom formed a separate apartment to his mother's, and immersed himself in his law papers. He was supposed to work far into the night. Often in winter his lamp was not extinguished before dawn. Mother and son absolutely lived for one another, as all who knew them took pleasure in repeating. They loved and honored Noel for the care he bestowed upon his mother, for his more than filial devotion, for the sacrifices which all supposed he made in living at his age like an old man. The neighbors were in the habit of contrasting the conduct of this exemplary young man with that of M. Tabaret, the incorrigible old rake, the hairless dangler. As for Madame Gerdy, she saw nothing but her son in all the world. Her love had actually taken the form of worship. In Noel she believed she saw united all the physical and moral perfections. To her he seemed of a superior order to the rest of humanity. If he spoke, she was silent and listened: his word was a command, his advice a decree of Providence. To care for her son, study his tastes, anticipate his wishes, was the sole aim of her life. She was a mother.

"Is Madame Gerdy visible?" asked old Tabaret of the girl who opened the door; and, without waiting for an answer, he walked into the room like a man assured that his presence can not be inopportune, and ought to be agreeable.

A single candle lighted the drawing-room, which was not in its accustomed order. The small marble-top table, usually in the middle of the room, had been rolled into a corner. Madame

Gerdy's large armchair was near the window; a newspaper, all crumpled, lay before it on the carpet. The amateur detective took in the whole at a glance. "Has any accident happened?" he asked of the girl.

"Do not speak of it, sir: we have just had a fright! oh, such a fright!"

"What was it? Tell me quickly!"

"You know that madame has been ailing for the last month. She has eaten I may say almost nothing. This morning, even, she said to me—"

"Yes, yes! but this evening?"

"After her dinner, madame went into the drawing-room as usual. She sat down and took up one of M. Noel's newspapers. Scarcely had she begun to read, when she uttered a great cry —oh, a terrible cry! We hastened to her; madame had fallen on to the floor, as one dead, M. Noel raised her in his arms, and carried her into her room. I wanted to fetch the doctor, sir, but he said there was no need; he knew what was the matter with her."

"And how is she now?"

"She has come to her senses; that is to say, I suppose so; for M. Noel made me leave the room. All that I do know is, that a little while ago she was talking, and talking very loudly too, for I heard her. Ah, sir, it is all the same, very strange?"

"What is strange?"

"What I heard Madame Gerdy say to M. Noel."

"Ah, ha! my girl!" sneered old Tabaret; "so you listen at keyholes, do you?"

"No, sir, I assure you; but madame cried out like one lost. She said—"

"My girl!" interrupted old Tabaret severely, "one always hears wrong through keyholes. Ask Manette if that is not so."

The poor girl, thoroughly confused, sought to excuse herself.

"Enough, enough!" said the old man. "Return to your work: you need not disturb M. Noel; I can wait for him very well here."

And satisfied with the reproof he had administered, he picked up the newspaper, and seated himself beside the fire, placing the candle near him so as to read with ease. A minute had scarcely elapsed when he in his turn bounded in his chair, and stifled a cry of instinctive terror and surprise. These were the first words that met his eye:

"A horrible crime has plunged the village of La Jonchere in consternation. A poor widow, named Lerouge, who enjoyed the general esteem and love of the community, has been assassinated in her home. The officers of the law have made the usual preliminary investigations, and everything leads us to believe that the police are already on the track of the author of this dastardly crime."

"Thunder!" said old Tabaret to himself, "can it be that Madame Gerdy—?" The idea but flashed across his mind; he fell back into his chair, and, shrugging his shoulders, murmured: "Really, this affair of La Jonchere is driving me out of my senses! I can think of nothing but this Widow Lerouge. I shall be seeing her in everything now." An uncontrollable curiosity caused him to peruse the entire paper. He found nothing, however, with the exception of those lines, to justify or explain a fainting fit, a cry, or even the slightest emotion.

"This coincidence is extremely singular," thought the incorrigible police agent. Then, noticing that the newspaper was slightly torn at the lower part, and crumpled, as if by a convulsive grasp, he repeated: "It is very strange!"

At this moment the door of Madame Gerdy's bedroom opened, and Noel appeared on the threshold. Without doubt the accident to his mother had greatly excited him; for he was very pale, and his countenance, ordinarily so calm, wore an expression of great worry. He appeared surprised to see M. Tabaret.

"Ah, my dear Noel!" cried the old fellow. "Ease my anxiety. How is your mother?"

"Madame Gerdy is as well as can be expected."

"Madame Gerdy!" repeated the old fellow with an air of astonishment; then he continued: "It is plain you have been seriously alarmed."

"In truth," replied the barrister, seating himself, "I have experienced a rude shock."

Noel was visibly making the greatest effort to appear calm, to listen to the old fellow, and to answer him. M. Tabaret, full of anxiety, perceived nothing. "At least, my dear boy," said he, "tell me how this happened!"

The young man hesitated a moment, as if debating with himself. No doubt he was unprepared for this point-blank question, and knew not what answer to make; at last he replied: "Madame Gerdy has received a severe blow in learning from

a paragraph in this paper that a woman in whom she took a strong interest has been murdered."

"Well, I never!" cried old Tabaret.

The old fellow was so astonished that he almost betrayed himself and revealed his connection with the police. He was on the point of saying: "What! your mother knew the Widow Lerouge?" By an effort he restrained himself. He had more trouble to hide his satisfaction, for he was delighted to find himself so unexpectedly on the trace of the antecedents of the victim of La Jonchere.

"She was," continued Noel, "the slave of Madame Gerdy, devoted to her in every way! She would have sacrificed herself for her at a sign from her hand."

"Then you, my dear friend, you knew this poor woman!"

"I had not seen her for a very long time," replied Noel, whose voice seemed broken by emotion; "but I knew her well. I ought even to say I loved her tenderly. She was my nurse."

"She, this woman?" stammered old Tabaret.

This time he was thunderstruck. Widow Lerouge Noel's nurse? He was most fortunate. Providence had evidently chosen him for its instrument, and was leading him by the hand. He was about to obtain all the information, which half an hour ago he had almost despaired of procuring. He remained seated before Noel, amazed and speechless. Yet he understood that, unless he would compromise himself, he must speak. "It is a great misfortune," he murmured at last.

"What it is for Madame Gerdy, I can not say," replied Noel with a gloomy air; "but for me it is an overwhelming misfortune! I am struck to the heart by the blow which has slain this poor woman. Her death, M. Tabaret, has annihilated all my dreams of the future, and probably overthrown my most cherished hopes. I had to avenge myself for cruel injuries; her death breaks the weapon in my hands, and reduces me to despair, to impotence. Alas! I am indeed unfortunate."

"You unfortunate?" cried old Tabaret, singularly affected by his dear Noel's sadness. "In heaven's name, what has happened to you?"

"I suffer," murmured the barrister, "and very cruelly. Not only do I fear that the injustice is irreparable; but here am I totally without defense delivered over to the shafts of calumny. I may be accused of inventing falsehood, of being

an ambitious intriguer, having no regard for truth, no scruples of conscience."

Old Tabaret was puzzled. What connection could possibly exist between Noel's honor and the assassination at La Jonchere? His brain was in a whirl. A thousand troubled and confused ideas jostled one another in inextricable confusion. "Come, come, Noel," said he, "compose yourself. Who would believe any calumny uttered about you? Take courage, have you not friends? am I not here? Have confidence, tell me what troubles you, and it will be strange, indeed, if between us two—"

The barrister started to his feet, impressed by a sudden resolution.

"Well! yes," interrupted he; "yes, you shall know all. In fact, I am tired of carrying all alone a secret that is stifling me. The part I have been playing irritates and wearies me. I have need of a friend to console me. I require a counselor whose voice will encourage me, for one is a bad judge of his own cause, and this crime has plunged me into an abyss of hesitations."

"You know," replied M. Tabaret kindly, "that I regard you as my own son. Do not scruple to let me serve you."

"Know then," commenced the barrister—"but no, not here: what I have to say must not be overheard. Let us go into my study."

IV

WHEN Noel and old Tabaret were seated face to face in Noel's study, and the door had been carefully shut, the old fellow felt uneasy, and said: "What if your mother should require anything."

"If Madame Gerdy rings," replied the young man dryly, "the servant will attend to her."

This indifference, this cold disdain, amazed old Tabaret, accustomed as he was to the affectionate relations always existing between mother and son. "For heaven's sake, Noel," said he,

"calm yourself. Do not allow yourself to be overcome by a feeling of irritation. You have, I see, some little pique against your mother, which you will have forgotten to-morrow. Don't speak of her in this icy tone; but tell me what you mean by calling her Madame Gerdy."

"What I mean?" rejoined the barrister in a hollow tone; "what I mean?" Then rising from his armchair, he took several strides about the room, and, returning to his place near the old fellow, said: "Because, M. Tabaret, Madame Gerdy is not my mother!"

This sentence fell like a heavy blow on the head of the amateur detective. "Oh!" he said in the tone one assumes when rejecting an absurd proposition, "do you really know what you are saying, Noel? Is it credible? Is it probable?"

"It is improbable," replied Noel with a peculiar emphasis which was habitual to him; "it is incredible, if you will, but yet it is true. That is to say, for thirty-three years, ever since my birth, this woman has played a most marvelous and unworthy comedy, to ennoble and enrich her son—for she has a son—at my expense!"

"My friend," commenced old Tabaret, who in the background of the picture presented by this singular revelation saw again the fantom of the murdered Widow Lerouge.

But Noel heard not, and seemed hardly in a state to hear. The young man, usually so cold, so self-contained, could no longer control his anger. At the sound of his own voice he became more and more animated, as a good horse might at the jingling of his harness. "Was ever man," continued he, "more cruelly deceived, more miserably duped, than I have been? I, who loved this woman, who knew not how to show my affection for her, who, for her sake, sacrificed my youth! How she must have laughed at me! Her infamy dates from the moment when for the first time she took me on her knees; and, until these few days past, she has sustained without faltering her execrable role. Her love for me was nothing but hypocrisy! her devotion, falsehood! her caresses, lies! And I adored her! Ah! why can I not take back all the embraces I bestowed on her in exchange for her Judas kisses? And for what was all this heroism of deception, this caution, this duplicity? To betray me more securely, to despoil me, to rob me, to give to her bastard all that lawfully appertained to me: my name, a noble name, my fortune, a princely inheritance!"

"We are getting near it!" thought old Tabaret, who was fast relapsing into the colleague of M. Gevrol; then aloud he said: "This is very serious, all that you have been saying, my dear Noel, terribly serious. We must believe Madame Gerdy possessed of an amount of audacity and ability rarely to be met with in a woman. She must have been assisted, advised, compelled perhaps. Who have been her accomplices? She could never have managed this unaided; perhaps her husband himself."

"Her husband!" interrupted the barrister with a laugh. "Ah! you too have believed her a widow. Pshaw! She never had a husband; the defunct Gerdy never existed. I was a bastard, dear M. Tabaret, very much a bastard; Noel, son of the girl Gerdy and an unknown father!"

"Ah!" cried the old fellow; "that, then, was the reason why your marriage with Mademoiselle Levernois was broken off four years ago?"

"Yes, my friend, that was the reason. And what misfortunes might have been averted by this marriage with a young girl whom I loved! However, I did not complain to her whom I then called my mother. She wept, she accused herself, she seemed ready to die of grief; and I, poor fool! I consoled her as best I could; I dried her tears and excused her in her own eyes. No, there was no husband. Do such women as she have husbands? She was my father's mistress; and on the day when he had had enough of her, he took up his hat and threw her three hundred thousand francs, the price of the pleasures she had given him."

Noel would probably have continued much longer to pour forth his furious denunciations, but M. Tabaret stopped him. The old fellow felt he was on the point of learning a history in every way similar to that which he had imagined; and his impatience to know whether he had guessed aright almost caused him to forget to express any sympathy for his friend's misfortunes.

"My dear boy," said he, "do not let us digress. You ask me for advice; and I am perhaps the best adviser you could have chosen. Come, then, to the point. How have you learned this? Have you any proofs? where are they?"

The decided tone in which the old fellow spoke should, no doubt, have awakened Noel's attention; but he did not notice it. He had not leisure to reflect. He therefore answered:

"I have known the truth for three weeks past. I made the discovery by chance. I have important moral proofs, but they are mere presumptive evidence. A word from Widow Lerouge, one single word, would have rendered them decisive. This word she can not now pronounce, since they have killed her; but she had said it to me. Now Madame Gerdy will deny all. I know her; with her head on the block she will deny it. My father doubtless will turn against me. I am certain, and I possess proofs; now this crime makes my certitude but a vain boast, and renders my proofs null and void!"

"Explain it all to me," said old Tabaret after a pause—"all, you understand. We old ones are sometimes able to give good advice. We will decide what's to be done afterward."

"Three weeks ago," commenced Noel, "searching for some old documents, I opened Madame Gerdy's secretary. Accidentally I displaced one of the small shelves: some papers tumbled out, and a packet of letters fell in front of my eyes. A mechanical impulse, which I can not explain, prompted me to untie the string, and, impelled by an invincible curiosity, I read the first letter which came to my hand."

"You did wrong," remarked M. Tabaret.

"Be it so; anyhow, I read. At the end of ten lines I was convinced that these letters were from my father, whose name, Madame Gerdy, in spite of my prayers, had always hidden from me. You can understand my emotion. I carried off the packet, shut myself up in this room, and devoured the correspondence from beginning to end."

"And you have been cruelly punished, my poor boy!"

"It is true; but who in my position could have resisted? These letters have given me great pain; but they afford the proof of what I just now told you."

"You have at least preserved these letters?"

"I have them here, M. Tabaret," replied Noel, "and, that you may understand the case in which I have requested your advice, I am going to read them to you."

The barrister opened one of the drawers of his bureau, pressed an invisible spring, and from a hidden receptacle constructed in the thick upper shelf he drew out a bundle of letters. "You understand, my friend," he resumed, "that I will spare you all insignificant details, which, however, add their own weight to the rest. I am only going to deal with the more important facts, treating directly of the affair."

Old Tabaret nestled in his armchair, burning with curiosity; his face and his eyes expressing the most anxious attention. After a selection, which he was some time in making, the barrister opened a letter and commenced reading in a voice which trembled at times, in spite of his efforts to render it calm.

"'My dearly loved Valerie'—Valerie," said he, "is Madame Gerdy."

"I know, I know. Do not interrupt yourself."

Noel then resumed.

"'My dearly loved Valerie:

"'This is a happy day. This morning I received your darling letter; I have covered it with kisses, I have reread it a hundred times; and now it has gone to join the others, here upon my heart. This letter, oh, my love! has nearly killed me with joy. You were not deceived then; it was true! Heaven has blessed our love. We shall have a son.

"'I shall have a son, the living image of my adored Valerie! Oh! why are we separated by such an immense distance? Why have I not wings, that I might fly to your feet and fall into your arms, full of the sweetest voluptuousness! No! never as at this moment have I cursed the fatal union imposed upon me by an inexorable family, whom my tears could not move.

"'I can not help hating this woman, who, in spite of me, bears my name, innocent victim though she is of the barbarity of our parents. And, to complete my misery, she too will soon render me a father. Who can describe my sorrow when I compare the fortunes of these two children?

"'The one, the son of the object of my tenderest love, will have neither father nor family, nor even a name, since a law framed to make lovers unhappy prevents my acknowledging him. While the other, the son of my detested wife, by the sole fact of his birth, will be rich, noble, surrounded by devotion and homage, with a great position in the world. I can not bear the thought of this terrible injustice! How it is to be prevented, I do not know; but rest assured I shall find a way. It is to him who is the most desired, the most cherished, the most beloved, that the greater fortunes should come; and come to him it shall, for I so will it.'"

"From where is that letter dated?" asked old Tabaret. The style in which it was written had already settled one point in his mind.

"See," replied Noel. He handed the letter to the old fellow, who read: "Venice, December, 1828."

"You perceive," resumed the barrister, "all the importance of this first letter. It is like a brief statement of the facts. My father, married in spite of himself, adores his mistress and detests his wife. Both find themselves enceinte at the same time, and his feelings toward the two infants about to be born are not at all concealed. Toward the end one almost sees peeping forth the germ of the idea which later on he will not be afraid to put into execution, in defiance of all law, human or divine!"

He was speaking as though pleading the cause, when old Tabaret interrupted him. "It is not necessary to explain it," said he. "Thank goodness, what you have just read is explicit enough. I am not an adept in such matters, I am as simple as a juryman; however, I understand it admirably so far."

"I pass over several letters," continued Noel, "and I come to this one, dated January 23, 1829. It is very long, and filled with matters altogether foreign to the subject which now occupies us. However, it contains two passages, which attest the slow but steady growth of my father's project. 'A destiny more powerful than my will, chains me to this country; but my soul is with you, my Valerie! Without ceasing, my thoughts rest upon the adored pledge of our love which moves within you. Take care, my darling, take care of yourself, now doubly precious. It is the lover, the father, who implores you. The last part of your letter wounds my heart. Is it not an insult to me for you to express anxiety as to the future of our child? Oh, heaven! she loves me, she knows me, and yet she doubts!'

"I skip," said Noel, "two pages of passionate rhapsody, and stop at these few lines at the end. 'The comtesse's condition causes her to suffer very much! Unfortunate wife! I hate and at the same time pity her. She seems to divine the reason of my sadness and my coldness. By her timid submission and unalterable sweetness one would think she sought pardon for our unhappy union. Poor, sacrificed creature! She also may have given her heart to another before being dragged to the altar. Our fates would then be the same. Your good heart will pardon my pitying her.'

"That one was my mother," cried the barrister in a trembling voice. "A saint! And he asks pardon for the pity she

inspires! Poor woman." He passed his hands over his eyes, as if to force back his tears, and added: "She is dead!"

In spite of his impatience, old Tabaret dared not utter a word. Besides, he felt keenly the profound sorrow of his young friend, and respected it. After a rather long silence, Noel raised his head, and returned to the correspondence.

"All the letters which follow," said he, "carry traces of the preoccupation of my father's mind on the subject of his bastard son. I lay them, however, aside. But this is what strikes me in the one written from Rome, on March 5, 1829. 'My son, our son, that is my great, my only anxiety. How to secure for him the future position of which I dream? The nobles of former times were not worried in this way. In those days I would have gone to the king, who, with a word, would have assured the child's position in the world. To-day the king who governs with difficulty his disaffected subjects can do nothing. The nobility has lost its rights, and the highest in the land are treated the same as the meanest peasants!' Lower down I find: 'My heart loves to picture to itself the likeness of our son. He will have the spirit, the mind, the beauty, the grace, all the fascinations of his mother. He will inherit from his father, pride, valor, and the sentiments of a noble race. And the other, what will he be like? I tremble to think of it. Hatred can only engender a monster. Heaven reserves strength and beauty for the children of love!' The monster, that is I!" said the barrister with intense rage. "While the other— But let us ignore these preliminaries to an outrageous action. I only desired up to the present to show you the aberration of my father's reason under the influence of his passion. We shall soon come to the point."

M. Tabaret was astonished at the strength of this passion, of which Noel was disturbing the ashes. Perhaps he felt it all the more keenly on account of those expressions which recalled his own youth. He understood how irresistible must have been the strength of such a love; and he trembled to speculate as to the result.

"Here is," resumed Noel, holding up a sheet of paper, "not one of those interminable epistles from which I have read you short extracts, but a simple billet. It is dated from Venice at the beginning of May; it is short but nevertheless decisive: 'Dear Valerie—Tell me, as near as possible, the probable date of your confinement. I await your reply with an anxiety you

would imagine could you but guess my projects with regard to our child!'

"I do not know," said Noel, "whether Madame Gerdy understood; anyhow she must have answered at once, for this is what my father wrote on the 14th: 'Your reply, my darling, is what I did not dare expect it to be. The project I had conceived is now practicable. I begin to feel more calm and secure. Our son shall bear my name; I shall not be obliged to separate myself from him. He shall be reared by my side, in my mansion, under my eyes, on my knees, in my arms. Shall I have strength enough to bear this excess of happiness? I have a soul for grief, shall I have one for joy? Oh! my adored one, oh! my precious child, fear nothing, my heart is vast enough to love you both! I set out to-morrow for Naples, from whence I shall write to you at length. Happen what may, however, though I should have to sacrifice the important interests confided to me, I shall be in Paris for the critical hour. My presence will double your courage; the strength of my love will diminish your sufferings.'"

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Noel," said old Tabaret, "do you know what important affairs detained your father abroad?"

"My father, my old friend," replied the barrister, "was, in spite of his youth, one of the friends, one of the confidants, of Charles X; and he had been entrusted by him with a secret mission to Italy. My father is Comte Rheteau de Commarin."

"Whew!" exclaimed the old fellow; and the better to engrave the name upon his memory, he repeated several times, between his teeth, "Rheteau de Commarin."

For a few minutes Noel remained silent. After having appeared to do everything to control his resentment, he seemed utterly dejected, as though he had formed the determination to attempt nothing to repair the injury he had sustained. "In the middle of the month of May, then," he continued, "my father is at Naples. It is while there that he, a man of prudence and sense, a dignified diplomatist, a nobleman, prompted by an insensate passion, dares to confide to paper this most monstrous of projects. Listen! 'My adored one—It is Germain, my old valet, who will hand you this letter. I am sending him to Normandy, charged with a commission of the most delicate nature. He is one of those servitors who may be trusted implicitly. The time has come for me to explain to you my projects respect-

ing my son. In three weeks, at the latest, I shall be in Paris. If my previsions are not deceived, the comtesse and you will be confined at the same time. An interval of three or four days will not alter my plan. This is what I have resolved. My two children will be entrusted to two nurses of N——, where my estates are nearly all situated. One of these women, known to Germain, and to whom I am sending him, will be in our interests. It is to this person, Valerie, that our son will be confided. These two women will leave Paris the same day, Germain accompanying her who will have charge of the son of the comtesse. An accident, devised beforehand, will compel these two women to pass one night on the road. Germain will arrange so they will have to sleep in the same inn and in the same chamber! During the night our nurse will change the infants in their cradles. I have foreseen everything, as I will explain to you, and every precaution has been taken to prevent our secret from escaping. Germain has instructions to procure, while in Paris, two sets of baby linen exactly similar. Assist him with your advice.

"'Your maternal heart, my sweet Valerie, may perhaps bleed at the thought of being deprived of the innocent caresses of your child. You will console yourself by thinking of the position secured to him by your sacrifice. What excess of tenderness can serve him as powerfully as this separation? As to the other, I know your fond heart, you will cherish him. Will it not be another proof of your love for me? Besides, he will have nothing to complain of. Knowing nothing, he will have nothing to regret; and all that money can secure in this world he shall have. Do not tell me that this attempt is criminal. No, my well beloved, no. The success of our plan depends upon so many unlikely circumstances, so many coincidences, independent of our will, that, without the evident protection of Providence, we can not succeed. If, then, success crowns our efforts, it will be because heaven decreed it. Meanwhile I hope.'"

"Just what I expected," murmured old Tabaret.

"And the wretched man," cried Noel, "dares to invoke the aid of Providence! He would make heaven his accomplice!"

"But," asked the old fellow, "how did your mother—pardon me, I would say, how did Madame Gerdy receive this proposition?"

"She would appear to have rejected it at first, for here are

twenty pages of eloquent persuasion from the comte, urging her to agree to it, trying to convince her. Oh, that woman!"

"Come, my child," said M. Tabaret softly, "try not to be too unjust. You seem to direct all your resentment against Madame Gerdy. Really, in my opinion, the comte is far more deserving of your anger than she is."

"True," interrupted Noel, with a certain degree of violence—"true, the comte is guilty, very guilty. He is the author of the infamous conspiracy, and yet I feel no hatred against him. He has committed a crime, but he has an excuse, his passion. Moreover, my father has not deceived me, like this miserable woman, every hour of my life, during thirty years. Besides, M. de Commarin has been so cruelly punished that, at the present moment, I can only pardon and pity him."

"Ah! so he has been punished?" interrogated the old fellow.

"Yes, fearfully, as you will admit. But allow me to continue. Toward the end of May, or, rather, during the first days of June, the comte must have arrived in Paris, for the correspondence ceases. He saw Madame Gerdy, and the final arrangements of the conspiracy were decided on. Here is a note which removes all uncertainty on that point. On the day it was written the comte was on service at the Tuileries, and unable to leave his post. He has written it even in the king's study, on the king's paper; see the royal arms! The bargain has been concluded, and the woman who has consented to become the instrument of my father's projects is in Paris. He informs his mistress of the fact. 'Dear Valerie—Germain informs me of the arrival of your son's, our son's, nurse. She will call at your house during the day. She is to be depended upon; a magnificent recompense insures her discretion. Do not, however, mention our plans to her; for she has been given to understand that you know nothing. I wish to charge myself with the sole responsibility of the deed; it is more prudent. This woman is a native of N——. She was born on our estate, almost in our house. Her husband is a brave and honest sailor. Her name is Claudine Lerouge. Be of good courage, my dear love! I am exacting from you the greatest sacrifice that a lover can hope for from a mother. Heaven, you can no longer doubt it, protects us. Everything depends now upon our skill and our prudence, so that we are sure to succeed!'"

On one point, at least, M. Tabaret was sufficiently enlightened. The researches into the past life of Widow Lerouge were

no longer difficult. He could not restrain an exclamation of satisfaction, which passed unnoticed by Noel.

"This note," resumed the barrister, "closes the comte's correspondence with Madame Gerdy."

"What!" exclaimed the old fellow, "you are in possession of nothing more?"

"I have also ten lines, written many years later, which certainly have some weight, but after all are only a moral proof."

"What a misfortune!" murmured M. Tabaret. Noel laid on the bureau the letters he had held in his hand, and turning toward his old friend, he looked at him steadily.

"Suppose," said he slowly and emphasizing every syllable—"suppose that all my information ends here. We will admit, for a moment, that I know nothing more than you do now. What is your opinion?"

Old Tabaret remained some minutes without answering; he was estimating the probabilities resulting from M. de Commarin's letters. "For my own part," said he at length, "I believe on my conscience that you are not Madame Gerdy's son."

"And you are right!" answered the barrister forcibly. "You will easily believe, will you not, that I went and saw Claudine. She loved me, this poor woman who had given me her milk; she suffered from the knowledge of the injustice that had been done me. Must I say it, her complicity in the matter weighed upon her conscience; it was a remorse too great for her old age. I saw her, I interrogated her, and she told me all. The comte's scheme, simply and yet ingeniously conceived, succeeded without any effort. Three days after my birth the crime was committed, and I, poor, helpless infant, was betrayed, despoiled, and disinherited by my natural protector, by my own father! Poor Claudine! She promised me her testimony for the day on which I should reclaim my rights!"

"And she is gone, carrying her secret with her!" murmured the old fellow in a tone of regret.

"Perhaps!" replied Noel, "for I have yet one hope. Claudine had in her possession several letters which had been written to her a long time ago, some by the comte, some by Madame Gerdy, letters both imprudent and explicit. They will be found, no doubt, and their evidence will be decisive. I have held these letters in my hands, I have read them; Claudine particularly wished me to keep them; why did I not do so?"

No! there was no hope on that side, and old Tabaret knew

so better than any one. It was these very letters, no doubt, that the assassin of La Jonchere wanted. He had found them and burned them with the other papers in the little stove. The old amateur detective was beginning to understand. "All the same," said he, "from what I know of your affairs, which I think I know as well as my own, it appears to me that the comte has not overwell kept the dazzling promises of fortune he made Madame Gerdy on your behalf."

"He never even kept them in the least degree, my old friend."

"That now," cried the old fellow indignantly, "is even more infamous than all the rest."

"Do not accuse my father," answered Noel gravely; "his connection with Madame Gerdy lasted a long time. I remember a haughty looking man who used sometimes to come and see me at school, and who could be no other than the comte. But the rupture came."

"Naturally," sneered M. Tabaret, "a great nobleman—"

"Wait before judging," interrupted the barrister. "M. de Commarin had his reasons. His mistress was false to him, he learned it, and cast her off with just indignation. The ten lines which I mentioned to you were written then."

Noel searched a considerable time among the papers scattered upon the table, and at length selected a letter more faded and creased than the others. Judging from the number of folds in the paper, one could guess that it had been read and reread many times. The writing even was here and there partly obliterated. "In this," said he in a bitter tone, "Madame Gerdy is no longer the adored Valerie: 'A friend, cruel as all true friends, has opened my eyes. I doubted. You have been watched, and to-day, unhappily, I can doubt no more. You, Valerie, you to whom I have given more than my life, you deceive me and have been deceiving me for a long time past. Unhappy man that I am! I am no longer certain that I am the father of your child.'"

"But this note is a proof," cried old Tabaret; "an overwhelming proof. Of what importance to the comte would be a doubt of his paternity had he not sacrificed his legitimate son to his bastard? Yes, you have said truly, his punishment has been severe."

"Madame Gerdy," resumed Noel, "wished to justify herself. She wrote to the comte; but he returned her letters unopened. She called on him, but he would not receive her. At length

she grew tired of her useless attempts to see him. She knew that all was well over when the comte's steward brought her for me a legal settlement of fifteen thousand francs a year. The son had taken my place, and the mother had ruined me!"

Three or four light knocks at the door of the study interrupted Noel. "Who is there?" he asked without stirring.

"Sir," answered the servant from the other side of the door, "madame wishes to speak to you."

The barrister appeared to hesitate. "Go, my son," advised M. Tabaret; "do not be merciless; only bigots have that right." Noel arose with visible reluctance, and passed into Madame Gerdy's sleeping apartment.

"Poor boy!" thought M. Tabaret when left alone. "What a fatal discovery! and how he must feel it. Such a noble young man! such a brave heart! In his candid honesty he does not even suspect from whence the blow has fallen. Fortunately I am shrewd enough for two, and it is just when he despairs of justice, I am confident of obtaining it for him. Thanks to his information, I am now on the track. A child might now divine whose hand struck the blow. But how has it happened? He will tell me without knowing it. Ah! if I had one of those letters for four and twenty hours. He has probably counted them. If I ask for one, I must acknowledge my connection with the police. I had better take one, no matter which, just to verify the handwriting."

Old Tabaret had just thrust one of the letters into the depths of his capacious pocket when the barrister returned. He was one of those men of strongly formed character, who never lose their self-control. He was very cunning and had long accustomed himself to dissimulation, that indispensable armor of the ambitious. As he entered the room nothing in his manner betrayed what had taken place between Madame Gerdy and himself. He was absolutely as calm as when, seated in his armchair, he listened to the interminable stories of his clients.

"Well," asked old Tabaret, "how is she now?"

"Worse," answered Noel. "She is now delirious, and no longer knows what she says. She has just assailed me with the most atrocious abuse, upbraiding me as the vilest of mankind! I really believe she is going out of her mind."

"One might do so with less cause," murmured M. Tabaret; "and I think you ought to send for the doctor."

"I have just done so."

The barrister had resumed his seat before his bureau, and was rearranging the scattered letters according to their dates. He seemed to have forgotten that he had asked his old friend's advice; nor did he appear in any way desirous of renewing the interrupted conversation. This was not at all what old Tabaret wanted. "The more I ponder over your history, my dear Noel," he observed, "the more I am bewildered. I really do not know what resolution I should adopt were I in your situation."

"Yes, my old friend," replied the barrister sadly, "it is a situation that might well perplex even more profound experiences than yours."

The old amateur detective repressed with difficulty the sly smile, which for an instant hovered about his lips. "I confess it humbly," he said, taking pleasure in assuming an air of intense simplicity, "but you, what have you done? Your first impulse must have been to ask Madame Gerdy for an explanation."

Noel made a startled movement, which passed unnoticed by old Tabaret, preoccupied as he was in trying to give the turn he desired to the conversation. "It was by that," answered Noel, "that I began."

"And what did she say?"

"What could she say! Was she not overwhelmed by the discovery?"

"What! did she not attempt to exculpate herself?" inquired the detective, greatly surprised.

"Yes! she attempted the impossible. She pretended she could explain the correspondence. She told me— But can I remember what she said? Lies, absurd, infamous lies." The barrister had finished gathering up his letters, without noticing the abstraction. He tied them together carefully, and replaced them in the secret drawer of his bureau.

"Yes," continued he, rising and walking backward and forward across his study, as if the constant movement could calm his anger, "yes, she pretended she could show me I was wrong. It was easy, was it not, with the proofs I held against her? The fact is, she adores her son, and her heart is breaking at the idea that he may be obliged to restitute what he has stolen from me. And I, idiot, fool, coward, almost wished not to mention the matter to her. I said to myself: I will forgive, for after all she has loved me! Loved? No. She would see me suffer the most horrible tortures, without shedding a tear, to prevent a single hair falling from her son's head."

"She has probably warned the comte," observed old Tabaret, still pursuing his idea.

"She may have tried, but can not have succeeded, for the comte has been absent from Paris for more than a month and is not expected to return until the end of the week."

"How do you know that?"

"I wished to see the comte, my father, to speak with him—"

"You?"

"Yes, I. Do you think that I shall not reclaim my own? Do you imagine that I shall not raise my voice? On what account should I keep silent? Whom have I to consider? I have rights, and I will make them good. What do you find surprising in that?"

"Nothing, certainly, my friend. So then you called at M. de Commarin's house?"

"Oh! I did not decide on doing so all at once," continued Noel. "At first my discovery almost drove me mad. Then I required time to reflect. A thousand opposing sentiments agitated me. At one moment, my fury blinded me; the next, my courage deserted me. I would, and I would not. I was undecided, uncertain, wild. The scandal that must arise from the publicity of such an affair terrified me. I desired, I still desire to recover my name, that much is certain. But on the eve of recovering it, I wish to preserve it from stain. I was seeking a means of arranging everything, without noise, without scandal."

"At length, however, you made up your mind?"

"Yes, after a struggle of fifteen days, fifteen days of torture, of anguish! Ah! what I suffered in that time! I neglected my business, being totally unfit for work. During the day, I tried by incessant action to fatigue my body, that at night I might find forgetfulness in sleep. Vain hope! Since I found these letters, I have not slept an hour."

From time to time, old Tabaret slyly consulted his watch. "M. Daburon will be in bed," thought he.

"At last, one morning," continued Noel, "after a night of rage, I determined to end all uncertainty. I was in that desperate state of mind, in which the gambler, after successive losses, stakes upon a card his last remaining coin. I plucked up courage, sent for a cab, and was driven to the De Commarin mansion."

The old amateur detective here allowed a sigh of satisfaction to escape him.

"It is one of the most magnificent houses in the Faubourg St. Germain, my friend, a princely dwelling, worthy a great noble twenty times a millionaire; almost a palace in fact. One enters at first a vast courtyard, to the right and left of which are the stables, containing twenty most valuable horses, and the coach-houses. At the end rises the grand facade of the main building, majestic and severe, with its immense windows, and its double flight of marble steps. Behind the house is a magnificent garden, I should say a park, shaded by the oldest trees which perhaps exist in all Paris."

This enthusiastic description was not at all what M. Tabaret wanted. But what could he do, how could he press Noel for the result of his visit! An indiscreet word might awaken the barrister's suspicions, and reveal to him that he was speaking not to a friend, but to a detective.

"Were you then shown over the house and grounds?" asked the old fellow.

"No, but I have examined them alone. Since I discovered that I was the only heir of the Rheteau de Commarins, I have found out the antecedents of my new family. I have studied our history at the Bibliotheque; it is a noble history. At night, utterly distracted, I have again and again wandered round the dwelling of my ancestors. Ah! you can not understand my emotions! 'It is there,' said I to myself, 'that I was born; there that I should have been brought up; there that I ought to reign to-day!' I tasted that awful bitterness of which banished men have died. I compared the bastard's brilliant destinies with my own sad and laborious career; and my indignation well-nigh mastered me. A mad impulse stirred me to force the doors, to rush into the principal drawing-room and drive out the intruder, the girl Gerdy's son, crying: 'Get out, bastard, get out, I am the master here!' The uncertainty of obtaining my rights whenever I wished alone restrained me. Oh! yes, I know it well, this dwelling of my ancestors! I love its old sculptures, its grand old trees, even the flagstones of the courtyard worn by the footsteps of my mother! I love all; especially the proud escutcheon, which frowns down from above the principal entrance and flings a haughty defiance to the stupid theories of this age of levelers."

This last phrase contrasted so strongly with the opinions usually expressed by the young barrister that M. Tabaret was obliged to turn away his head to conceal his amusement.

"Poor humanity!" thought he. "He sees himself a grand lord already."

"When I arrived," resumed Noel, "a Swiss porter, dressed in a gorgeous livery, was standing at the door. I asked to see the Comte de Commarin. The Swiss replied that the comte was traveling, but that the vicomte was at home. This interfered with my plans; however, as I had gone so far, I insisted on speaking to the son in default of the father. The Swiss stared at me with astonishment. He had seen me alight from a hired vehicle and so deliberated with himself for some moments as to whether I was not too insignificant a person to have the honor of appearing before the vicomte."

"However, you were able to speak with him?"

"What, like that, all at once!" replied the barrister in a tone of bitter raillery; "can you possibly think so, my dear M. Tabaret! The inspection, however, was favorable to me; my white cravat and black clothes produced an effect. The Swiss entrusted me to the guidance of a huntsman with a plumed hat, who led the way across the courtyard to a superb vestibule, where five or six footmen were lolling and gaping on their seats. One of these gentlemen asked me to follow him. He led me up a spacious staircase, wide enough for a carriage to ascend, preceded me along an extensive picture gallery, guided me across vast apartments, the furniture of which was fading under its coverings, and finally delivered me into the hands of M. Albert's valet. That is the name by which Madame Gerdy's son is known, that is to say, my name."

"I understand, I understand."

"I had passed an inspection; now I had to undergo an examination. The valet desired to be informed who I was, whence I came, what was my profession, what I wanted, and all the rest. I answered simply that, quite unknown to the vicomte, I desired five minutes' conversation with him on a matter of importance. He left me, requesting me to sit down and wait. I had waited more than a quarter of an hour, when he reappeared. His master graciously deigned to receive me."

It was easy to perceive that the barrister's reception rankled in his breast, and that he considered it an insult. He could not forgive Albert his lackeys and his valet. He forgot the words of the illustrious duke, who said: "I pay my lackeys to be insolent, to save myself the trouble and ridicule of being so." Old Tabaret was surprised at his young friend's display of bitter-

ness, in speaking of these trivial details. "What narrow-mindedness," thought he, "for a man of such intelligence! Can it be true that the arrogance of lackeys is the secret of the people's hatred of an amiable and polite aristocracy?"

"I was ushered into a small apartment," continued Noel, "simply furnished, the only ornaments of which were weapons. These, ranged against the walls, were of all times and countries. Never have I seen in so small a space so many muskets, pistols, swords, sabres, and foils. One might have imagined himself in a fencing master's arsenal."

The weapon used by Widow Lerouge's assassin naturally recurred to the old fellow's memory.

"The vicomte," said Noel, speaking slowly, "was half lying on a divan when I entered. He was dressed in a velvet jacket and loose trousers of the same material, and had around his neck an immense white silk scarf. I do not cherish any resentment against this young man; he has never to his knowledge injured me: he was in ignorance of our father's crime; I am therefore able to speak of him with justice. He is handsome, bears himself well, and nobly carries the name which does not belong to him. He is about my height, of the same dark complexion, and would resemble me, perhaps, if he did not wear a beard. Only he looks five or six years younger; but this is readily explained, he has neither worked, struggled, nor suffered. He is one of the fortunate ones who arrive without having to start, or who traverse life's road on such soft cushions that they are never injured by the jolting of their carriage. On seeing me, he arose and saluted me graciously."

"You must have been dreadfully excited," remarked old Tabaret.

"Less than I am at this moment. Fifteen preparatory days of mental torture exhausts one's emotions. I answered the question I saw upon his lips. 'Sir,' said I, 'you do not know me; but that is of little consequence. I come to you, charged with a very grave, a very sad mission, which touches the honor of the name you bear.' Without doubt he did not believe me, for, in an impertinent tone, he asked me: 'Shall you be long?' I answered simply: 'Yes.'"

"Pray," interrupted old Tabaret, now become very attentive, "do not omit a single detail; it may be very important, you understand."

"The vicomte," continued Noel, "appeared very much put

out. 'The fact is,' he explained, 'I had already disposed of my time. This is the hour at which I call on the young lady to whom I am engaged, Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Can we not postpone this conversation?"

"Good! another woman!" said the old fellow to himself.

"I answered the vicomte that an explanation would admit of no delay; and, as I saw him prepare to dismiss me, I drew from my pocket the comte's correspondence, and presented one of the letters to him. On recognizing his father's handwriting, he became more tractable, declared himself at my service, and asked permission to write a word of apology to the lady by whom he was expected. Having hastily written the note, he handed it to his valet, and ordered him to send it at once to Madame d'Arlange. He then asked me to pass into the next room, which was his library."

"One word," interrupted the old fellow; "was he troubled on seeing the letters?"

"Not the least in the world. After carefully closing the door, he pointed to a chair, seated himself, and said: 'Now, sir, explain yourself.' I had had time to prepare myself for this interview while waiting in the anteroom. I had decided to go straight to the point. 'Sir,' said I, 'my mission is painful. The facts I am about to reveal to you are incredible. I beg you, do not answer me until you have read the letters I have here. I beseech you, above all, to keep calm.' He looked at me with an air of extreme surprise, and answered: 'Speak! I can hear all.' I stood up, and said: 'Sir, I must inform you that you are not the legitimate son of M. de Commarin, as this correspondence will prove to you. The legitimate son exists; and he it is who sends me.' I kept my eyes on his while speaking, and I saw there a passing gleam of fury. For a moment I thought he was about to spring at my throat. He soon recovered himself. 'The letters,' said he in a short tone. I handed them to him."

"How!" cried old Tabaret, "these letters—the true ones? How imprudent!"

"And why?"

"If he had—I don't know; but—" the old fellow hesitated.

The barrister laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder. "I was there," said he in a hollow tone; "and I promise you the letters were in no danger."

Noel's features assumed such an expression of ferocity that

the old fellow was almost afraid, and recoiled instinctively. "He would have killed him," thought he.

"That which I have done for you this evening, my friend," resumed the barrister, "I did for the vicomte. I obviated, at least for the moment, the necessity of reading all of these one hundred and fifty-six letters. I told him only to stop at those marked with a cross, and to carefully read the passages indicated with a red pencil."

"It was an abridgment of his penance," remarked old Tabaret.

"He was seated," continued Noel, "before a little table, too fragile even to lean upon. I was standing with my back to the fireplace in which a fire was burning. I followed his slightest movements; and I scanned his features closely. Never in my life have I seen so sad a spectacle, nor shall I forget it, if I live for a thousand years. In less than five minutes his face changed to such an extent that his own valet would not have recognized him. He held his handkerchief in his hand, with which from time to time he mechanically wiped his lips. He grew paler and paler, and his lips became as white as his handkerchief. Large drops of sweat stood upon his forehead, and his eyes became dull and clouded, as if a film had covered them; but not an exclamation, not a sigh, not a groan, not even a gesture, escaped him. At one moment, I felt such pity for him that I was almost on the point of snatching the letters from his hands, throwing them into the fire and taking him in my arms, crying: 'No, you are my brother! Forget all; let us remain as we are and love one another!'"

M. Tabaret took Noel's hand, and pressed it. "Ah!" he said, "I recognize my generous boy."

"If I have not done this, my friend, it is because I thought to myself: 'Once these letters destroyed, would he recognize me as his brother?'"

"Ah! very true."

"In about half an hour, he had finished reading; he arose, and facing me directly, said: 'You are right, sir. If these letters are really written by my father, as I believe them to be, they distinctly prove that I am not the son of the Comtesse de Commarin.' I did not answer. 'Meanwhile,' continued he, 'these are only presumptions. Are you possessed of other proofs?' I expected, of course, a great many other objections. 'Germain,' said I, 'can speak.' He told me that Germain had been dead for several years. Then I spoke of the nurse, Widow

Lerouge. I explained how easily she could be found and questioned, adding that she lived at La Jonchere."

"And what said he, Noel, to this?" asked old Tabaret anxiously.

"He remained silent at first, and appeared to reflect. All on a sudden he struck his forehead, and said: 'I remember; I know her. I have accompanied my father to her house three times, and in my presence he gave her a considerable sum of money.' I remarked to him that this was yet another proof. He made no answer, but walked up and down the room. At length he turned toward me, saying: 'Sir, you know M. de Commarin's legitimate son?' I answered: 'I am he.' He bowed his head and murmured: 'I thought so.' He then took my hand and added: 'Brother, I bear you no ill will for this.'"

"It seems to me," remarked old Tabaret, that he might have left that to you to say, and with more reason and justice."

"No, my friend, for he is more ill-used than I. I have not been lowered, for I did not know, while he! . . ."

The old police agent nodded his head, he had to hide his thoughts, and they were stifling him.

"At length," resumed Noel, after a rather long pause, "I asked him what he proposed doing. 'Listen,' he said, 'I expect my father in about eight or ten days. You will allow me this delay. As soon as he returns I will have an explanation with him, and justice shall be done. I give you my word of honor. Take back your letters and leave me to myself. This news has utterly overwhelmed me. In a moment I lose everything: a great name that I have always borne as worthily as possible, a magnificent position, an immense fortune, and, more than all that, perhaps, the woman who is dearer to me than life. In exchange, it is true, I shall find a mother. We will console each other. And I will try, sir, to make her forget you, for she must love you, and will miss you.'"

"Did he really say that?"

"Almost word for word."

"Hypocrite!" growled the old fellow between his teeth.

"What did you say?" asked Noel.

"I say that he is a fine young man; and I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

"I did not show him the letter referring to the rupture," added Noel; "it is best that he should ignore Madame Gerdy's misconduct. I voluntarily deprived myself of this proof rather than give him further pain."

"And now?"

"What am I to do? I am waiting the comte's return. I shall act more freely after hearing what he has to say. To-morrow I shall ask permission to examine the papers belonging to Claudine. If I find the letters, I am saved; if not—but, as I have told you, I have formed no plan since I heard of the assassination. Now, what do you advise?"

"The briefest counsel demands long reflection," replied the old fellow, who was in haste to depart. "Alas! my poor boy, what worry you have had!"

"Terrible! and, in addition, I have pecuniary embarrassments."

"How! you who spend nothing?"

"I have entered into various engagements. Can I now make use of Madame Gerdy's fortune, which I have hitherto used as my own? I think not."

"You certainly ought not to. But listen! I am glad you have spoken of this; you can render me a service."

"Very willingly. What is it?"

"I have, locked up in my secretary, twelve or fifteen thousand francs, which trouble me exceedingly. You see, I am old, and not very brave, if any one heard I had this money—"

"I fear I can not—" commented the barrister.

"Nonsense!" said the old fellow. "To-morrow I will give them you to take care of." But remembering he was about to put himself at M. Daburon's disposal, and that perhaps he might not be free on the morrow, he quickly added: "No, not to-morrow; but this very evening. This infernal money shall not remain another night in my keeping."

He hurried out, and presently reappeared, holding in his hand fifteen notes of a thousand francs each. "If that is not sufficient," said he, handing them to Noel, "you can have more."

"Anyhow," replied the barrister, "I will give you a receipt for these."

"Oh! never mind. Time enough to-morrow."

"And if I die to-night?"

Then said the old fellow to him, thinking of his will: "I shall still be your debtor. Good night!" added he aloud. "You have asked my advice, I shall require the night for reflection. At present my brain is whirling; I must go into the air. If I go to bed now, I am sure to have a horrible nightmare. Come, my boy; patience and courage. Who knows whether at this very hour Providence is not working for you?"

He went out, and Noel, leaving his door open, listened to the sound of his footsteps as he descended the stairs. Almost immediately the cry of, "Open, if you please," and the banging of the door apprised him that M. Tabaret had gone out. He waited a few minutes and refilled his lamp. Then he took a small packet from one of his bureau drawers, slipped into his pocket the bank-notes lent him by his old friend, and left his study, the door of which he double-locked. On reaching the landing, he paused. He listened intently, as though the sound of Madame Gerdy's moans could reach him where he stood. Hearing nothing, he descended the stairs on tiptoe. A minute later, he was in the street.

V

INCLUDED in Madame Gerdy's lease was a coach-house, which was used by her as a lumber room. Here were heaped together all the old rubbish of the household, broken pieces of furniture, utensils past service, articles become useless or cumbrous. It was also used to store the provision of wood and coal for the winter. This old coach-house had a small door opening on the street, which had been in disuse for many years; but which Noel had had secretly repaired and provided with a lock. He could thus enter or leave the house at any hour without the concierge or any one else knowing. It was by this door that the barrister went out, though not without using the utmost caution in opening and closing it. Once in the street, he stood still a moment, as if hesitating which way to go. Then, he slowly proceeded in the direction of the St. Lazare railway station, where a cab happening to pass, he hailed it. "Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue de Provence," said Noel, entering the vehicle, "and drive quick."

The barrister alighted at the spot named, and dismissed the cabman. When he had seen him drive off, Noel turned into the Rue de Provence, and, after walking a few yards, rang the bell of one of the handsomest houses in the street. The door

was immediately opened. As Noel passed before him the concierge made a most respectful, and at the same time patronizing, bow, one of those salutations which Parisian concierges reserve for their favorite tenants, generous mortals always ready to give. On reaching the second floor, the barrister paused, drew a key from his pocket, and opening the door facing him, entered as if at home. But at the sound of the key in the lock, though very faint, a lady's maid, rather young and pretty, with a bold pair of eyes, ran toward him. "Ah! it is you, sir," cried she. This exclamation escaped her just loud enough to be audible at the extremity of the apartment, and serve as a signal if needed. It was as if she had cried: "Take care!" Noel did not seem to notice it. "Madame is there?" asked he.

"Yes, sir, and very angry too. This morning she wanted to send some one to you. A little while ago she spoke of going to find you, sir, herself. I have had much difficulty in prevailing on her not to disobey your orders."

"Very well," said the barrister.

"Madame is in the smoking-room," continued the girl. "I am making her a cup of tea. Will you have one, sir?"

"Yes," replied Noel. "Show me a light, Charlotte."

He passed successively through a magnificent dining-room, a splendid gilded drawing-room in Louis XIV style and entered the smoking-room. This was a rather large apartment with a very high ceiling. Once inside one might almost fancy one's self three thousand miles from Paris, in the house of some opulent mandarin of the Celestial Empire. Furniture, carpet, hangings, pictures, all had evidently been imported direct from Hong Kong or Shanghai. A rich silk tapestry, representing brilliantly colored figures, covered the walls, and hid the doors from view. All the empire of the sun and moon was depicted thereon in vermilion landscapes; corpulent mandarins surrounded by their lantern-bearers; learned men lay stupefied with opium, sleeping under their parasols; young girls, with elevated eyebrows, stumbled upon their diminutive feet, swathed in bandages. The carpet of a manufacture unknown to Europeans was strewn with fruits and flowers, so true to nature that they might have deceived a bee. Some great artist of Peking had painted on the silk which covered the ceiling numerous fantastic birds, opening on azure ground their wings of purple and gold. Slender rods of lacker, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, bordered the draperies, and marked the angles of the apartment.

Two fantastic-looking chests entirely occupied one side of the room. Articles of furniture of capricious and incoherent forms, tables with porcelain tops, and chiffoniers of precious woods encumbered every recess or angle. There were also ornamental cabinets and shelves purchased of Lien-Tsi, the Tahan of Sou-Tcheou, the artistic city, and a thousand curiosities, both miscellaneous and costly, from the ivory sticks which are used instead of forks, to the porcelain teacups, thinner than soap bubbles—miracles of the reign of Kien-Loung. A very large and very low divan piled up with cushions, covered with tapestry similar to the hangings, occupied one end of the room. There was no regular window, but instead a large single pane of glass, fixed into the wall of the house; in front of it was a double glass door with movable panels, and the space between was filled with the most rare flowers. The grate was replaced by registers adroitly concealed, which maintained in the apartment a temperature fit for hatching silkworms, thus truly harmonizing with the furniture.

When Noel entered, a woman, still young, was reclining on the divan, smoking a cigarette. In spite of the tropical heat, she was enveloped in heavy Cashmere shawls. She was small, but then only small women can unite in their persons every perfection. Women who are above the medium height must be either essays or errors of nature. No matter how lovely they may look, they invariably present some defect, like the work of a statuary, who, though possessed of genius, attempts for the first time sculpture on a grand scale. She was small, but her neck, her shoulders, and her arms had the most exquisite contours. Her hands with their tapering fingers and rosy nails looked like jewels preciously cared for. Her feet, encased in silken stockings almost as thin as a spider's web, were a marvel; not that they recalled the very fabulous foot which Cinderella thrust into the glass slipper; but the other, very real, very celebrated, and very palpable foot, of which the fair owner (the lovely wife of a well-known banker) used to present the model either in bronze or in marble to her numerous admirers. Her face was not beautiful, nor even pretty; but her features were such as one seldom forgets; for, at the first glance, they startled the beholder like a flash of lightning. Her forehead was a little high, and her mouth unmistakably large, notwithstanding the provoking freshness of her lips. Her eyebrows were so perfect they seemed to have been drawn with India

ink; but, unhappily the pencil had been used too heavily; and they gave her an unpleasant expression when she frowned. On the other hand, her smooth complexion had a rich golden pallor; and her black and velvety eyes possessed enormous magnetic power. Her teeth were of a pearly brilliancy and whiteness, and her hair, of prodigious opulence, was black and fine, and glossy as a raven's wing.

On perceiving Noel, as he pushed aside the silken hangings, she half arose and leaned upon her elbow. "So you have come at last?" she observed in a tone of vexation; "you are very kind."

The barrister felt almost suffocated by the oppressive temperature of the room. "How warm it is!" said he; "it is enough to stifle one!"

"Do you find it so?" replied the young woman. "Well, I am actually shivering! It is true, though, that I am very unwell. Waiting is unbearable to me, it acts upon my nerves; and I have been waiting for you ever since yesterday."

"It was quite impossible for me to come," explained Noel, "quite impossible!"

"You knew, however," continued the lady, "that to-day was my settling day; and that I had several heavy accounts to settle. The tradesmen all came, and I had not a halfpenny to give them. The coachmaker sent his bill, but there was no money. Then that old rascal Clergot, to whom I had given an acceptance for three thousand francs, came and kicked up a row. How pleasant all this is!"

Noel bowed his head like a schoolboy rebuked for having neglected his lessons. "It is but one day behind," he murmured.

"And that is nothing, is it?" retorted the young woman. "A man who respects himself, my friend, may allow his own signature to be dishonored, but never that of his mistress! Do you wish to destroy my credit altogether? You know very well that the only consideration I receive is what my money pays for. So as soon as I am unable to pay, it will be all up with me."

"My dear Juliette," began the barrister gently.

"Oh, yes! that's all very fine," interrupted she. "Your dear Juliette! Your adored Juliette! So long as you are here it is really charming; but no sooner are you outside than you forget everything. Do you ever remember then that there is such a person as Juliette?"

"How unjust you are!" replied Noel. "Do you not know that I am always thinking of you? Have I not proved it to you a thousand times? Look here! I am going to prove it to you again this very instant." He withdrew from his pocket the small packet he had taken out of his bureau drawer, and, undoing it, showed her a handsome velvet casket. "Here," said he exultingly, "is the bracelet you longed for so much a week ago at Beaugran's."

Madame Juliette, without rising, held out her hand to take the casket, and, opening it with the utmost indifference, just glanced at the jewel, and merely said: "Ah!"

"Is this the one you wanted?" asked Noel.

"Yes, but it looked much prettier in the shop window." She closed the casket, and threw it carelessly on to a small table near her.

"I am unfortunate this evening," said the barrister, much mortified.

"How so?"

"I see plainly the bracelet does not please you."

"Oh, but it does. I think it lovely . . . besides, it will complete the two dozen."

It was now Noel's turn to say: "Ah! . . ." and as Juliette said nothing, he added: "Well, if you are pleased, you do not show it."

"Oh! so that is what you are driving at!" cried the lady. "I am not grateful enough to suit you! You bring me a present, and I ought at once to pay cash, fill the house with cries of joy, and throw myself upon my knees before you, calling you a great and magnificent lord!"

Noel was unable this time to restrain a gesture of impatience, which Juliette perceived plainly enough, to her great delight.

"Would that be sufficient?" continued she. "Shall I call Charlotte, so that she may admire this superb bracelet, this monument of your generosity? Shall I have the concierge up, and call the cook to tell them how happy I am to possess such a magnificent lover?"

The barrister shrugged his shoulders like a philosopher, incapable of noticing a child's banter. "What is the use of these insulting jests?" said he. "If you have any real complaint against me, better to say so simply and seriously."

"Very well," said Juliette, "let us be serious. And that being so, I will tell you it would have been better to have

forgotten the bracelet, and to have brought me last night or this morning the eight thousand francs I wanted."

"I could not come."

"You should have sent them; messengers are still to be found at the street corners."

"If I neither brought nor sent them, my dear Juliette, it was because I did not have them. I had trouble enough in getting them promised me for to-morrow. If I have the sum this evening, I owe it to chance upon which I could not have counted an hour ago; but by which I profited, at the risk of compromising myself."

"Poor man!" said Juliette, with an ironical touch of pity in her voice. "Do you dare to tell me you have had difficulty in obtaining ten thousand francs—you?"

"Yes—I!"

The young woman looked at her lover, and burst into a fit of laughter. "You are really superb when you act the poor young man!" said she.

"I am not acting."

"So you say, my own. But I see what you are aiming at. This amiable confession is the preface. To-morrow you will declare that your affairs are very much embarrassed, and the day after to-morrow. . . . Ah! you are becoming very avaricious. It is a virtue you used not to possess. Do you not already regret the money you have given me?"

"Wretched woman!" murmured Noel, fast losing patience.

"Really," continued the lady, "I pity you, oh! so much. Unfortunate lover! Shall I get up a subscription for you? In your place, I would appeal to public charity."

Noel could stand it no longer, in spite of his resolution to remain calm. "You think it a laughing matter?" cried he. "Well! let me tell you, Juliette, I am ruined, and I have exhausted my last resources! I am reduced to expedients!"

The eyes of the young woman brightened. She looked at her lover tenderly. "Oh, if 'twas only true, my big pet!" said she. "If I only could believe you!"

The barrister was wounded to the heart. "She believes me," thought he; "and she is glad. She detests me."

He was mistaken. The idea that a man had loved her sufficiently to ruin himself for her, without allowing even a reproach to escape him, filled this woman with joy. She felt herself on the point of loving the man, now poor and humbled,

whom she had despised when rich and proud. But the expression of her eyes suddenly changed. "What a fool I am," cried she, "I was on the point of believing all that, and of trying to console you. Don't pretend that you are one of those gentlemen who scatter their money broadcast. Tell that to somebody else, my friend! All men in our days calculate like money-lenders. There are only a few fools who ruin themselves now, some conceited youngsters, and occasionally an amorous old dotard. Well, you are a very calm, very grave, and very serious fellow, but above all, a very strong one."

"Not with you, anyhow," murmured Noel.

"Come now, stop that nonsense! You know very well what you are about. Instead of a heart, you have a great big double zero, just like a Homburg. When you took a fancy to me, you said to yourself: 'I will expend so much on passion,' and you have kept your word. It is an investment, like any other, in which one receives interest in the form of pleasure. You are capable of all the extravagance in the world, to the extent of your fixed price of four thousand francs a month! If it required a franc more you would very soon take back your heart and your hat, and carry them elsewhere; to one or other of my rivals in the neighborhood."

"It is true," answered the barrister, coolly. "I know how to count, and that accomplishment is very useful to me! It enables me to know exactly how and where I have got rid of my fortune."

"So you really know?" sneered Juliette.

"And I can tell you, madame," continued he. "At first you were not very exacting, but the appetite came with eating. You wished for luxury, you have it; splendid furniture, you have it; a complete establishment, extravagant dresses, I could refuse you nothing. You required a carriage, a horse, I gave them you. And I do not mention a thousand other whims. I include neither this Chinese cabinet nor the two dozen bracelets. The total is four hundred thousand francs!"

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as any one can be who has had that amount, and has it no longer."

"Four hundred thousand francs, only fancy! Are there no centimes?"

"No."

"Then, my dear friend, if I make up my bill, you will still owe me something."

The entrance of the maid with the tea-tray interrupted this amorous duet, of which Noel had experienced more than one repetition. The barrister held his tongue on account of the servant. Juliette did the same on account of her lover, for she had no secrets for Charlotte, who had been with her three years, and with whom she had shared everything, sometimes even her lovers.

Madame Juliette Chaffour was a Parisian. She was born about 1839, somewhere in the upper end of the Faubourg Montmartre. Her father was unknown. Her infancy was a long alternation of beatings and caresses, equally furious. She had lived as best she could, on sweetmeats and damaged fruit; so that now her stomach could stand anything. At twelve years old she was as thin as a nail, as green as a June apple, and more depraved than the inmates of the prison of St. Lazare. Prudhomme would have said that this precocious little hussy was totally destitute of morality. She had not the slightest idea what morality was. She thought the world was full of honest people living like her mother, and her mother's friends. She feared neither God nor devil, but she was afraid of the police. She dreaded also certain mysterious and cruel persons, whom she had heard spoken of, who dwelt near the Palais de Justice, and who experienced a malicious pleasure in seeing pretty girls in trouble. As she gave no promise of beauty, she was on the point of being placed in a shop, when an old and respectable gentleman, who had known her mama some years previously, accorded her his protection. This old gentleman, prudent and provident, like all old gentlemen, was a connoisseur, and knew that to reap one must sow. He resolved first of all to give his protege just a varnish of education. He procured masters for her, who in less than three years taught her to write, to play the piano, and to dance. What he did not procure for her, however, was a lover. She therefore found one for herself, an artist who taught her nothing very new, but who carried her off to offer her half of what he possessed, that is to say, nothing. At the end of three months, having had enough of it, she left the nest of her first love, with all she possessed tied up in a cotton pocket handkerchief.

During the four years which followed, she led a precarious existence, sometimes with little else to live upon but hope, which never wholly abandons a young girl who knows she

has pretty eyes. By turns she sunk to the bottom, or rose to the surface of the stream in which she found herself. Twice had fortune in new gloves come knocking at her door, but she had not the sense to keep her. With the assistance of a strolling player, she had just appeared on the stage of a small theatre, and spoken her lines rather well, when Noel by chance met her, loved her, and made her his mistress. Her barrister, as she called him, did not displease her at first. After a few months, though, she could not bear him. She detested him for his polite and polished manners, his manly bearing, his distinguished air, his contempt, which he did not care to hide, for all that is low and vulgar, and, above all, for his unalterable patience, which nothing could tire. Her great complaint against him was that he was not at all funny, and also, that he absolutely declined to conduct her to those places where one can give a free vent to one's spirits. To amuse herself, she began to squander money; and her aversion for her lover increased at the same rate as her ambition and his sacrifices. She rendered him the most miserable of men, and treated him like a dog; and this not from any natural badness of disposition, but from principle. She was persuaded that a woman is beloved in proportion to the trouble she causes and the mischief she does.

Juliette was not wicked, and she believed she had much to complain of. The dream of her life was to be loved in a way which she felt, but could scarcely have explained. She had never been to her lovers more than a plaything. She understood this; and, as she was naturally proud, the idea enraged her. She dreamed of a man who would be devoted enough to make a real sacrifice for her, a lover who would descend to her level, instead of attempting to raise her to his. She despaired of ever meeting such a one. Noel's extravagance left her as cold as ice. She believed he was very rich, and singularly, in spite of her greediness, she did not care much for money. Noel would have won her easier by a brutal frankness that would have shown her clearly his situation. He lost her love by the delicacy of his dissimulation, that left her ignorant of the sacrifices he was making for her.

Noel adored Juliette. Until the fatal day he saw her, he had lived like a sage. This, his first passion, burned him up; and, from the disaster, he saved only appearances.

The four walls remained standing, but the interior of the

edifice was destroyed. Even heroes have their vulnerable parts, Achilles died from a wound in the heel. The most artfully constructed armor has a flaw somewhere. Noel was assailable by means of Juliette, and through her was at the mercy of everything and every one. In four years, this model young man, this barrister of immaculate reputation, this austere moralist, had squandered not only his own fortune on her, but Madame Gerdy's also. He loved her madly, without reflection, without measure, with his eyes shut. At her side, he forgot all prudence, and thought out loud. In her boudoir, he dropped his mask of habitual dissimulation, and his vices displayed themselves at ease, as his limbs in a bath. He felt himself so powerless against her, that he never essayed to struggle. She possessed him. Once or twice he attempted to firmly oppose her ruinous caprices; but she had made him pliable as the osier. Under the dark glances of this girl, his strongest resolutions melted more quickly than snow beneath an April sun. She tortured him; but she had also the power to make him forget all by a smile, a tear, or a kiss. Away from the enchantress, reason returned at intervals, and, in his lucid moments, he said to himself, "She does not love me. She is amusing herself at my expense!" But the belief in her love had taken such deep root in his heart that he could not pluck it forth. He made himself a monster of jealousy, and then argued with himself respecting her fidelity. On several occasions he had strong reasons to doubt her constancy, but he never had the courage to declare his suspicions. "If I am not mistaken, I shall either have to leave her," thought he, "or accept everything in the future." At the idea of a separation from Juliette, he trembled, and felt his passion strong enough to compel him to submit to the lowest indignity. He preferred even these heartbreaking doubts to a still more dreadful certainty.

The presence of the maid who took a considerable time in arranging the tea-table gave Noel an opportunity to recover himself. He looked at Juliette; and his anger took flight. Already he began to ask himself if he had not been a little cruel to her. When Charlotte retired, he came and took a seat on the divan beside his mistress, and attempted to put his arms round her. "Come," said he in a caressing tone, "you have been angry enough for this evening. If I have done wrong, you have punished me sufficiently. Kiss me, and make it up."

She repulsed him angrily, and said in a dry tone: "Let me alone! How many times must I tell you that I am very unwell this evening."

"You suffer, my love?" resumed the barrister, "where? Shall I send for the doctor?"

"There is no need. I know the nature of my malady; it is called ennui. You are not at all the doctor who could do anything for me."

Noel rose with a discouraged air, and took his place at the side of the tea-table, facing her. His resignation bespoke how habituated he had become to these rebuffs. Juliette snubbed him; but he returned always, like the poor dog who lies in wait all day for the time when his caresses will not be inopportune. "You have told me very often during the last few months, that I bother you. What have I done?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, then, why—?"

"My life is nothing more than a continual yawn," answered the young woman; "is it my fault? Do you think it very amusing to be your mistress? Look at yourself. Does there exist another being as sad, as dull as you, more uneasy, more suspicious, devoured by a greater jealousy?"

"Your reception of me, my dear Juliette," ventured Noel, "is enough to extinguish gaiety and freeze all effusion. Then one always fears when one loves!"

"Really! Then one should seek a woman to suit one's self, or have her made to order; shut her up in the cellar, and have her brought upstairs once a day, at the end of dinner, during dessert, or with the champagne just by way of amusement."

"I should have done better not to have come," murmured the barrister.

"Of course. I am to remain alone here, without anything to occupy me except a cigarette and a stupid book, that I go to sleep over? Do you call this an existence, never to budge out of the house even?"

"It is the life of all the respectable women that I know," replied the barrister dryly.

"Then I can not compliment them on their enjoyment. Happily, though, I am not a respectable woman, and I can tell you that I am tired of living more closely shut up than the wife of a Turk, with your face for sole amusement."

"You live shut up, you?"

"Certainly!" continued Juliette, with increased bitterness. "Come, have you ever brought one of your friends here? No, you hide me. When have you offered me your arm for a walk? Never, your dignity would be sullied, if you were seen in my company. I have a carriage. Have you entered it half a dozen times? Perhaps; but then you let down the blinds! I go out alone. I walk about alone!"

"Always the same refrain," interrupted Noel, anger getting the better of him, "always these uncalled-for complaints. As though you had still to learn the reason why this state of things exists."

"I know well enough," pursued the young woman, "that you are ashamed of me. Yet I know many bigger swells than you who do not mind being seen with their mistresses. My lord trembles for his fine name of Gerdy that I might sully, while the sons of the most noble families are not afraid of showing themselves in public places in the company of the stupidest of kept women."

At last Noel could stand it no longer, to the great delight of Madame Chaffour. "Enough of these recriminations!" cried he, rising. "If I hide our relations, it is because I am constrained to do so. Of what do you complain? You have unrestrained liberty; and you use it, too, and so largely that your actions altogether escape me. You accuse me of creating a vacuum around you. Who is to blame? Did I grow tired of a happy and quiet existence? My friends would have come to see us in a home in accordance with a modest competence. Can I bring them here? On seeing all this luxury, this insolent display of my folly, they would ask each other where I obtained all the money I have spent on you. I may have a mistress, but I have not the right to squander a fortune that does not belong to me. If my acquaintances learned to-morrow that it is I who keep you, my future prospects would be destroyed. What client would confide his interests to the imbecile who ruined himself for the woman who has been the talk of all Paris? I am not a great lord, I have neither an historical name to tarnish, nor an immense fortune to lose. I am plain Noel Gerdy, a barrister. My reputation is all that I possess. It is a false one, I admit. Such as it is, however, I must keep it, and I will keep it."

Juliette who knew her Noel thoroughly, saw that she had gone far enough. She determined, therefore, to put him in a good humor again. "My friend," said she, tenderly, "I did

not wish to cause you pain. You must be indulgent, I am so horribly nervous this evening."

This sudden change delighted the barrister, and almost sufficed to calm his anger. "You will drive me mad with your injustice," said he. "While I exhaust my imagination to find what can be agreeable to you, you are perpetually attacking my gravity; yet it is not forty-eight hours since we were plunged in all the gaiety of the carnival. I kept the fete of Shrove Tuesday like a student. We went to a theatre; I then put on a domino, and accompanied you to the ball at the opera, and even invited two of my friends to sup with us."

"It was very gay indeed!" answered the young woman, making a wry face.

"So I think."

"Do you! Then you are not hard to please. We went to the Vaudeville, it is true, but separately, as we always do, I alone above, you below. At the ball you looked as though you were burying the devil. At the supper-table your friends were as melancholy as a pair of owls. I obeyed your orders by affecting hardly to know you. You imbibed like a sponge, without my being able to tell whether you were drunk or not."

"That proves," interrupted Noel, "that we ought not to force our tastes. Let us talk of something else." He took a few steps in the room, then looking at his watch said: "Almost one o'clock; my love, I must leave you."

"What! you are not going to remain?"

"No, to my great regret; my mother is dangerously ill. He unfolded and counted out on the table the bank-notes he had received from old Tabaret.

"My little one," said he, "here are not eight thousand francs, but ten thousand. You will not see me again for a few days."

"Are you leaving Paris, then?"

"No; but my entire time will be absorbed by an affair of immense importance to myself. If I succeed in my undertaking, my dear, our future happiness is assured, and you will then see whether I love you!"

"Oh, my dear Noel, tell me what it is."

"I can not now."

"Tell me, I beseech you," pleaded the young woman, hanging round his neck, raising herself upon the tips of her toes to press her lips to his. The barrister embraced her; and his resolution seemed to waver.

"No," said he at length; "seriously, I can not. Of what use to awaken in you hopes which can never be realized? Now, my darling, listen to me. Whatever may happen, understand, you must under no pretext whatever again come to my house, as you once had the imprudence to do. Do not even write to me. By disobeying, you may do me an irreparable injury. If any accident occurs, send that old rascal Clergot to me. I shall have a visit from him the day after to-morrow, for he holds some bills of mine."

Juliette recoiled, menacing Noel with a mutinous gesture. "You will not tell me anything?" insisted she.

"Not this evening, but very soon," replied the barrister, embarrassed by the piercing glance of his mistress.

"Always some mystery!" cried Juliette, piqued at the want of success attending her blandishments.

"This will be the last, I swear to you!"

"Noel, my good man," said the young woman in a serious tone, "you are hiding something from me. I understand you, as you know; for several days past there has been something or other the matter with you; you have completely changed."

"I swear to you, Juliette—"

"No, swear nothing; I should not believe you. Only remember, no attempt at deceiving me, I forewarn you. I am a woman capable of revenge."

The barrister was evidently ill at ease. "The affair in question," stammered he, "can as well fail as succeed."

"Enough," interrupted Juliette; "your will shall be obeyed. I promise that. Come, sir, kiss me. I am going to bed."

The door was hardly shut upon Noel when Charlotte was installed on the divan near her mistress. Had the barrister been listening at the door, he might have heard Madame Juliette saying, "No, really, I can no longer endure him. What a bore he is, my girl. Ah! if I was not so afraid of him, wouldn't I leave him at once? But he is capable of killing me!"

The girl vainly tried to defend Noel; but her mistress did not listen. She murmured: "Why does he absent himself, and what is he plotting? An absence of eight days is suspicious. Can he by any chance intend to be married? Ah! if I only knew. You weary me to death, my good Noel, and I am determined to leave you to yourself one of these fine mornings; but I can not permit you to quit me first. Supposing he is going to get married? But I will not allow it. I must make inquiries."

Noel, however, was not listening at the door. He went along the Rue de Provence as quickly as possible, gained the Rue St. Lazare, and entered the house as he had departed, by the stable door. He had but just sat down in his sutdy when the servant knocked. "Sir," cried she, "in heaven's name, answer me!"

He opened the door and said impatiently: "What is it now?"

"Sir," stammered the girl in tears, "this is the third time I have knocked, and you have not answered. Come, I implore you. I am afraid madame is dying!"

He followed her to Madame Gerdy's room. He must have found the poor woman terribly changed, for he could not restrain a movement of terror. The invalid struggled painfully beneath her coverings. Her face was of a livid paleness, as though there was not a drop of blood left in her veins; and her eyes, which glittered with a sombre light, seemed filled with a fine dust. Her hair, loose and disordered, falling over her cheeks and upon her shoulders, contributed to her wild appearance. She uttered from time to time a groan hardly audible, or murmured unintelligible words. At times a fiercer pang than the former ones forced a cry of anguish from her. She did not recognize Noel.

"You see, sir," said the servant.

"Yes. Who would have supposed her malady could advance so rapidly? Quick, run to Dr. Herve's; tell him to get up and to come at once; tell him it is for me." And he seated himself in an armchair, facing the suffering woman.

Dr. Herve was one of Noel's friends, an old school-fellow, and the companion of his student days. The doctor's history differed in nothing from that of most young men, who, without fortune, friends, or influence, enter upon the practise of the most difficult, the most hazardous of professions that exist in Paris, where one sees so many talented young doctors forced, to earn the bread, to place themselves at the disposition of infamous drug vendors. A man of remarkable courage and self-reliance, Herve, his studies over, said to himself, "No, I will not go and bury myself in the country; I will remain in Paris; I will there become celebrated. I shall be surgeon-in-chief of a hospital and a knight of the Legion of Honor." To enter upon this path of thorns, leading to a magnificent triumphal arch, the future academician ran himself twenty thousand francs in debt to furnish a small apartment. Here, armed with a patience which nothing could fatigue, an iron resolution that nothing could

subdue, he struggled and waited. Only those who have experienced it can understand what sufferings are endured by the poor, proud man, who waits in a black coat, freshly shaven, with smiling lips, while he is starving of hunger! The refinements of civilization have inaugurated punishments which put in the shade the cruelties of the savage. The unknown physician must begin by attending the poor who can not pay him. Sometimes, too, the patient is ungrateful. He is profuse in promises while in danger; but when cured he scorns the doctor, and forgets to pay him his fee.

After seven years of heroic perseverance, Herve has secured at last a circle of patients who pay him. During this he lived and paid the exorbitant interest of his debt, but he is getting on. Three or four pamphlets, and a prize won without much intrigue, have attracted public attention to him. But he is no longer the brave young enthusiast, full of the faith and hope that attended him on his first visits. He still wishes, and more than ever, to acquire distinction, but he no longer expects any pleasure from his success. He used up that feeling in the days when he had not wherewith to pay for his dinner. No matter how great his fortune may be in the days to come, he has already paid too dearly for it. For him future success is only a kind of revenge. Less than thirty-five years old, he is already sick of the world, and believes in nothing. Under the appearance of universal benevolence he conceals universal scorn. His finesse, sharpened by the grindstone of adversity, has become mischievous. And, while he sees through all disguises worn by others, he hides his penetration carefully under a mask of cheerful good nature and jovialness. But he is kind, he loves his friends, and is devoted to them.

He arrived, hardly dressed, so great had been his haste. His first words on entering were: "What is the matter?"

Noel pressed his hand in silence, and, by way of answer, pointed to the bed. In less than a minute, the doctor seized the lamp, examined the sick woman, and returned to his friend. "What has happened?" he asked sharply. "It is necessary I should know."

The barrister started. "Know what?" stammered he.

"Everything!" answered Herve. "She is suffering from inflammation of the brain. There is no mistaking that. It is by no means a common complaint, in spite of the constant working of that organ. What can have caused it? There appears

to be no injury to the brain or its bony covering; the mischief, then, must have been caused by some violent emotion, a great grief, some unexpected catastrophe—"

Noel interrupted his friend by a gesture, and drew him into the embrasure of the window. "Yes, my friend," said he in a low tone, "Madame Gerdy has experienced great mental suffering; she has been frightfully tortured by remorse. Listen, Herve. I will confide our secret to your honor and your friendship. Madame Gerdy is not my mother; she despoiled me, to enrich her son with my fortune and my name. Three weeks ago I discovered this unworthy fraud; she knows it, and the consequences terrify her. Ever since she has been dying minute by minute."

The barrister expected some exclamations of astonishment and a host of questions from his friend; but the doctor received the explanation without remark, as a simple statement, indispensable to his understanding the case. "Three weeks," he murmured; "then that explains everything. Has she appeared to suffer much during the time?"

"She complained of violent headaches, dimness of sight, and intolerable pains in her ears; she attributed all that though to megrims. Do not, however, conceal anything from me, Herve; is her complaint very serious?"

"So serious, my friend, so invariably fatal, that I am almost undertaking a hopeless task in attempting a cure."

"Ah! good heaven!"

"You asked for the truth, and I have told it you. If I had that courage, it was because you told me this poor woman is not your mother. Nothing short of a miracle can save her; but this miracle we hay hope and prepare for. And now to work!"

VI

THE clock of the St. Lazare terminus was striking eleven as old Tabaret, after shaking hands with Noel, left his house, still bewildered by what he had just heard. Obliged to restrain himself at the time, he now fully appreciated his liberty

of action. It was with an unsteady gait that he took his first steps in the street, like the toper who, after being shut up in a warm room, suddenly goes out into the open air. He was beaming with pleasure, but at the same time felt rather giddy, from that rapid succession of unexpected revelations, which, so he thought, had suddenly placed him in possession of the truth. Notwithstanding his haste to arrive at M. Daburon's, he did not take a cab. He felt the necessity of walking. He was one of those who require exercise to see things clearly. When he moved about his ideas fitted and classified themselves in his brain, like grains of wheat when shaken in a bushel. Without hastening his pace, he reached the Rue de la Chaussee d'Antin, crossed the Boulevard with its resplendent cafes, and turned to the Rue Richelieu. He walked along, unconscious of external objects, tripping and stumbling over the inequalities of the sidewalk, or slipping on the greasy pavement. If he followed the proper road, it was a purely mechanical impulse that guided him. His mind was wandering at random through the field of probabilities, and following in the darkness the mysterious thread, the almost imperceptible end of which he had seized at La Jonchere. Like all persons laboring under strong emotion without knowing it, he talked aloud, little thinking into what indiscreet ears his exclamations and disjointed phrases might fall. At every step we meet in Paris people babbling to themselves, and unconsciously confiding to the four winds of heaven their dearest secrets, like cracked vases that allow their contents to steal away. Often the passers-by mistake these eccentric monologuists for lunatics. Sometimes the curious follow them, and amuse themselves by receiving these strange confidences. It was an indiscretion of this kind which told the ruin of Riscara, the rich banker. Lambreth, the assassin of the Rue de Venise, betrayed himself in a similar manner.

"What luck!" exclaimed old Tabaret. "What an incredible piece of good fortune! Gevrol may dispute it if he likes, but after all chance is the cleverest agent of the police. Who would have imagined such a history? I was not, however, very far from the reality. I guessed there was a child in the case. But who would have dreamed of a substitution?—an old sensational effect, that playwrights no longer dare make use of. This is a striking example of the danger of following preconceived ideas in police investigation. We are affrighted at unlikelihood; and, as in this case, the greatest unlikelihood often proves to be the

truth. We retire before the absurd, and it is the absurd that we should examine. Everything is possible. I would not take a thousand crowns for what I have learned this evening. I shall kill two birds with one stone. I deliver up the criminal, and I give Noel a hearty lift up to recover his title and his fortune. There, at least, is one who deserves what he will get. For once I shall not be sorry to see a lad get on who has been brought up in the school of adversity. But, pshaw! he will be like all the rest. Prosperity will turn his brain. Already he begins to prate of his ancestors— Poor humanity! he almost made me laugh— But it is Mother Gerdy who surprises me most. A woman to whom I would have given absolution without waiting to hear her confess. When I think that I was on the point of proposing to her, ready to marry her! B-r-r-r!" At this thought the old fellow shivered. He saw himself married, and all on a sudden, discovering the antecedents of Madame Tabaret, becoming mixed up with a scandalous prosecution, compromised, and rendered ridiculous. "When I think," he continued, "that my worthy Gevrol is running after the man with the earrings! Run, my boy, run! Travel is a good thing for youth. Won't he be vexed? He will wish me dead. But I don't care. If any one wishes to do me an injury, M. Daburon will protect me. Ah! there is one to whom I am going to do a good turn. I can see him now opening his eyes like saucers when I say to him, 'I have the rascal!' He can boast of owing me something. This investigation will bring him honor, or justice is not justice. He will, at least, be made an officer of the Legion of Honor. So much the better! I like him. If he is asleep, I am going to give him an agreeable waking. Won't he just overpower me with questions! He will want to know everything at once." Old Tabaret, who was now crossing the Pont des Saints-Peres, stopped suddenly. "But the details!" said he. "By Jove! I have none. I only know the bare facts." He resumed his walk, and continued: "They are right at the office, I am too enthusiastic; I jump at conclusions, as Gevrol says. When I was with Noel, I should have cross-examined him, got hold of a quantity of useful details; but I did not even think of doing so. I drank in his words. I would have had him tell the story in a sentence. All the same, it is but natural; when one is pursuing a stag, one does not stop to shoot a blackbird. But I see very well now, I did not draw him out enough. On the other hand, by questioning him more, I might have awakened

suspicions in Noel's mind, and led him to discover that I am working for the Rue de Jerusalem. To be sure, I do not blush for my connection with the police, I am even vain of it; but at the same time I prefer that no one should know of it. People are so stupid that they detest the police, who protect them. I must be calm and on my best behavior, for here I am at the end of my journey."

M. Daburon had just gone to bed, but had given orders to his servant; so that M. Tabaret had but to give his name to be at once conducted to the magistrate's sleeping apartment. At sight of his amateur detective, M. Daburon raised himself in his bed, saying: "There is something extraordinary! What have you discovered? have you got a clue?"

"Better than that," answered the old fellow, smiling with pleasure.

"Speak quickly!"

"I know the culprit!"

Old Tabaret ought to have been satisfied; he certainly produced an effect. The magistrate bounded in his bed. "Already!" said he. "Is it possible?"

"I have the honor to repeat to you, sir," resumed the old fellow, "that I know the author of the crime of La Jonchere."

"And I," said M. Daburon, "I proclaim you the greatest of all detectives, past or future. I shall certainly never hereafter undertake an investigation without your assistance."

"You are too kind, sir. I have had little or nothing to do in the matter. The discovery is due to chance alone."

"You are modest, M. Tabaret. Chance assists only the clever, and it is that which annoys the stupid. But I beg you will be seated and proceed."

Then with the lucidness and precision of which few would have believed him capable, the old fellow repeated to the magistrate all that he had learned from Noel. He quoted from memory the extracts from the letters, almost without changing a word. "These letters," added he, "I have seen; and I have even taken one, in order to verify the writing. Here it is."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate. "Yes, M. Tabaret, you have discovered the criminal. The evidence is palpable, even to the blind. Heaven has willed this. Crime engenders crime. The great sin of the father has made the son an assassin."

"I have not given you the names, sir," resumed old Tabaret. "I wished first to hear your opinion."

"Oh! you can name them," interrupted M. Daburon with a certain degree of animation; "no matter how high he may have to strike, a French magistrate has never hesitated."

"I know it, sir, but we are going very high this time; the father who has sacrificed his legitimate son for the sake of his bastard is Comte Rheteau de Commarin, and the assassin of Widow Lerouge is the bastard, Vicomte Albert de Commarin!"

M. Tabaret, like an accomplished artist, had uttered these words slowly, and with a deliberate emphasis, confidently expecting to produce a great impression. His expectation was more than realized. M. Daburon was struck with stupor. He remained motionless, his eyes dilated with astonishment. Mechanically he repeated like a word without meaning which he was trying to impress upon his memory: "Albert de Commarin! Albert de Commarin!"

"Yes," insisted old Tabaret, "the noble vicomte. It is incredible, I know." But he perceived the alteration in the magistrate's face, and, a little frightened, he approached the bed. "Are you unwell, sir?" he asked.

"No," answered M. Daburon, without exactly knowing what he said. "I am very well; but the surprise, the emotion—"

"I understand that," said the old fellow.

"Yes, it is not surprising, is it? I should like to be alone a few minutes. Do not leave the house though; we must converse at some length on this business. Kindly pass into my study, there ought still to be a fire burning there. I will join you directly."

Then M. Daburon slowly got out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, and seated himself, or rather fell, into an armchair. His face, to which in the exercise of his austere functions he had managed to give the immobility of marble, reflected the most cruel agitation; while his eyes betrayed the inward agony of his soul. The name of Commarin, so unexpectedly pronounced, awakened in him the most sorrowful recollections, and tore open a wound but badly healed. This name recalled to him an event which had rudely extinguished his youth and spoiled his life. Involuntarily he carried his thoughts back to this epoch, so as to taste again all its bitterness. An hour ago it had seemed to him far removed and already hidden in the mists of the past; one word had sufficed to recall it clearly and distinctly. It seemed to him now that this event, in which the name of Albert de Commarin was mixed up, dated from yesterday. In reality nearly two years had elapsed since.

Pierre-Marie Daburon belonged to one of the oldest families of Poitou. Three or four of his ancestors had filled successively the most important positions in the province. Why, then, had they not bequeathed a title and a coat of arms to their descendants? The magistrate's father possesses, round about the ugly modern chateau which he inhabits, more than eight hundred thousand francs' worth of the most valuable land. By his mother, a Cottevise-Luxe, he is related to the highest nobility of Poitou, one of the most exclusive that exists in France, as every one knows. When he received his nomination in Paris, his relationship caused him to be received at once by five or six aristocratic families, and it was not long before he extended his circle of acquaintance. He possessed, however, none of the qualifications which insure social success. He was cold and grave even to sadness, reserved and timid even to excess. His mind wanted brilliancy and lightness; he lacked the facility of repartee and the amiable art of conversing without a subject; he could neither tell a lie nor pay an insipid compliment. Like most men who feel deeply, he was unable to interpret his impressions immediately. He required to reflect and consider within himself. However, he was sought after for more solid qualities than these: for the nobleness of his sentiments, his pleasant disposition, and the certainty of his connections. Those who knew him intimately quickly learned to esteem his sound judgment, his keen sense of honor, and to discover under his cold exterior a warm heart, an excessive sensibility, and a delicacy almost feminine. In a word, although he might be eclipsed in a room full of strangers or simpletons, he charmed all hearts in a smaller circle where he felt warmed by an atmosphere of sympathy. He accustomed himself to go about a great deal. He reasoned, wisely perhaps, that a magistrate can make better use of his time than by remaining shut up in his study in company with books of law. He thought that a man called upon to judge others ought to know them, and for that purpose study them. An attentive and discreet observer, he examined the play of human interests and passions, exercised himself in disentangling and maneuvring at need the strings of the puppets he saw moving around him. Piece by piece, so to say, he labored to comprehend the working of the complicated machine called society, of which he was charged to overlook the movements, regulate the springs, and keep the wheels in order.

And on a sudden, in the early part of the winter of 1860 and

1861, M. Daburon disappeared. His friends sought for him, but he was nowhere to be met with. What could he be doing? Inquiry resulted in the discovery that he passed nearly all his evenings at the house of the Marquise d'Arlange. The surprise was as great as it was natural. This dear marquise was, or rather is—for she is still in the land of the living—a personage whom one would consider rather out of date. She is surely the most singular legacy bequeathed us by the eighteenth century. How and by what marvelous process she had been preserved such as we see her, it is impossible to say. Listening to her, you would swear that she was yesterday at one of those parties given by the queen where cards and high stakes were the rule, much to the annoyance of Louis XVI, and where the great ladies cheated openly in emulation of each other. Manners, language, habits, almost costume, she has preserved everything belonging to that period about which authors have written only to display the defects. Her appearance alone will tell more than an exhaustive article, and an hour's conversation with her, more than a volume. She was born in a little principality, where her parents had taken refuge while awaiting the chastisements and repentance of an erring and rebellious people. She had been brought up among the old nobles of the emigration, in some very ancient and very gilded apartment, just as though she had been in a cabinet of curiosities. Her mind had awakened amid the hum of antediluvian conversations, her imagination had first been aroused by arguments a little less profitable than those of an assembly of deaf persons convoked to decide upon the merits of the work of some distinguished musician. Here she imbibed a fund of ideas, which, applied to the forms of society of to-day, are as grotesque as would be those of a child shut up until twenty years of age in an Assyrian museum. The First Empire, the Restoration, the monarchy of July, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, have passed beneath her windows, but she has not taken the trouble to open them. All that has happened since '89 she considers as never having been. For her it is a nightmare from which she is still awaiting a release. She has looked at everything, but then she looks through her own pretty glasses which show her everything as she would wish it, and which are to be obtained of dealers in illusions.

Though over sixty-eight years old, she is as straight as a poplar, and has never been ill. She is vivacious and active to

excess, and can only keep still when asleep or when playing her favorite game of piquet. She has her four meals a day, eats like a vintager, and takes her wine neat. She professes an undisguised contempt for the silly women of our century who live for a week on a partridge, and inundate with water grand sentiments which they entangle in long phrases. She has always been, and still is, very positive, and her word is prompt and easily understood. She never shrinks from using the most appropriate word to express her meaning. So much the worse if some delicate ears object! She heartily detests hypocrisy. She believes in God, but she believes also in M. de Voltaire, so that her devotion is, to say the least, problematical. However, she is on good terms with the curate of her parish, and is very particular about the arrangement of her dinner on the days she honors him with an invitation to her table. She seems to consider him a subaltern, very useful to her salvation, and capable of opening the gate of paradise for her. Such as she is, she is shunned like the plague. Everybody dreads her loud voice, her terrible indiscretion, and the frankness of speech which she affects, in order to have the right of saying the most unpleasant things which pass through her head. Of all her family, there only remains her granddaughter, whose father died very young. Of a fortune originally large, and partly restored by the indemnity allowed by the government, but since administered in the most careless manner, she has only been able to preserve an income of twenty thousand francs, which diminishes day by day. She is also proprietor of the pretty little house which she inhabits, situated near the Invalides, between a rather narrow courtyard and a very extensive garden. So circumstanced, she considers herself the most unfortunate of God's creatures, and passes the greater part of her life complaining of her poverty. From time to time, especially after some exceptionally bad speculation, she confesses that what she fears most is to die in a pauper's bed.

A friend of M. Daburon's presented him one evening to the Marquise d'Arlange, having dragged him to her house in a mirthful mood, saying: "Come with me, and I will show you a phenomenon, a ghost of the past in flesh and bone." The marquise rather puzzled the magistrate the first time he was admitted to her presence. On his second visit she amused him very much; for which reason he came again. But after a while she no longer amused him, though he still continued a faithful

and constant visitor to the rose-colored boudoir wherein she passed the greater part of her life. Madame d'Arlange conceived a violent friendship for him, and became eloquent in his praises. "A most charming young man," she declared; "delicate and sensible! What a pity he is not 'born'! One can receive him, though, all the same; his forefathers were very decent people, and his mother was a Cottevise, who, however, went wrong. I wish him well, and will do all I can to push him forward." The strongest proof of friendship he received from her was that she condescended to pronounce his name like the rest of the world. She had preserved that ridiculous affectation of forgetfulness of the names of people who were not of noble birth, and who in her opinion had no right to names. She was so confirmed in this habit that, if by accident she pronounced such a name correctly, she immediately repeated it with some ludicrous alteration. During his first visit, M. Daburon was extremely amused at hearing his name altered every time she addressed him. Successively she made it Taburon, Dabiron, Maliron, Laliron, Laridon; but in three months' time she called him Daburon as distinctly as if he had been a duke of something and a lord of somewhere.

Occasionally she exerted herself to prove to the worthy magistrate that he was a nobleman, or at least ought to be. She would have been happy if she could have persuaded him to adopt some title, and have a helmet engraved upon his visiting cards. "How is it possible," said she, "that your ancestors, eminent, wealthy, and influential, never thought of being raised from the common herd and securing a title for their descendants? Today you would possess a presentable pedigree."

"My ancestors were wise," responded M. Daburon. "They preferred being foremost among their fellow citizens to becoming last among the nobles." Upon which the marquise explained, and proved to demonstration, that between the most influential and wealthy citizen and the smallest scion of nobility there was an abyss that all the money in the world could not fill up.

They who were so surprised at the frequency of the magistrate's visits to this celebrated "relic of the past" did not know that lady's granddaughter, or, at least, did not recollect her; she went out so seldom! The old marquise did not care, so she said, to be bothered with a young spy who would be in her way when she related some of her choice anecdotes. Claire d'Arlange was just seventeen years old. She was extremely graceful and

gentle in manner, and lovely in her natural innocence. She had a profusion of fine light-brown hair, which fell in ringlets over her well-shaped neck and shoulders. Her figure was still rather slender, but her features recalled Guido's most celestial faces. Her blue eyes, shaded by long lashes of a hue darker than her hair, had above all an adorable expression. A certain air of antiquity, the result of her association with her grandmother, added yet another charm to the young girl's manner. She had more sense, however, than her relative; and, as her education had not been neglected, she had imbibed pretty correct ideas of the world in which she lived. This education, these practical ideas, Claire owed to her governess, upon whose shoulders the marquise had thrown the entire responsibility of cultivating her mind. This governess, Mademoiselle Schmidt, chosen at hazard, happened by the most fortunate chance to be both well informed and possessed of principle. She was, what is often met with on the other side of the Rhine, a woman at once romantic and practical, of the tenderest sensibility and the severest virtue. This good woman, while she carried her pupil into the land of sentimental fantasy and poetical imaginings, gave her at the same time the most practical instruction in matters relating to actual life. She revealed to Claire all the peculiarities of thought and manner that rendered her grandmother so ridiculous, and taught her to avoid them, but without ceasing to respect them.

Every evening, on arriving at Madame d'Arlange's, M. Daburon was sure to find Claire seated beside her grandmother, and it was for that that he called. While listening with an inattentive ear to the old lady's rigmaroles and her interminable anecdotes of the emigration, he gazed upon Claire, as a fanatic upon his idol. Often in his ecstasy he forgot where he was for the moment and became absolutely oblivious of the old lady's presence, although her shrill voice was piercing the tympanum of his ear like a needle. Then he would answer her at cross-purposes, committing the most singular blunders, which he labored afterward to explain. But he need not have taken the trouble. Madame d'Arlange did not perceive her courtier's absence of mind; her questions were of such a length that she did not care about the answers. Having a listener, she was satisfied, provided that from time to time he gave signs of life. When obliged to sit down to play piquet, he cursed below his breath the game and its detestable inventor. He paid no atten-

tion to his cards. He made mistakes every moment, discarding what he should keep in and forgetting to cut. The old lady was annoyed by these continual distractions, but she did not scruple to profit by them. She looked at the discard, changed the cards which did not suit her, while she audaciously scored points she never made, and pocketed the money thus won without shame or remorse. M. Daburon's timidity was extreme, and Claire was unsociable to excess; they therefore seldom spoke to each other. During the entire winter the magistrate did not directly address the young girl ten times; and on these rare occasions he had learned mechanically by heart the phrase he proposed to repeat to her, well knowing that, without this precaution, he would most likely be unable to finish what he had to say. But at least he saw her, he breathed the same air with her, he heard her voice, whose pure and harmonious vibrations thrilled his very soul. By constantly watching her eyes he learned to understand all their expressions. He believed he could read in them all her thought, and through them look into her soul as through an open window. "She is pleased to-day," he would say to himself; and then he would be happy. At other times, he thought, "She has met with some annoyance to-day"; and immediately he became sad. The idea of asking for her hand many times presented itself to his imagination; but he never dared to entertain it. Knowing, as he did, the marquise's prejudices, her devotion to titles, her dread of any approach to a mésalliance, he was convinced she would shut his mouth at the first word by a very decided "no," which she would maintain. To attempt the thing would be to risk, without a chance of success, his present happiness, which he thought immense, for love lives upon its own misery. "Once repulsed," thought he, "the house is shut against me; and then farewell to happiness, for life will end for me." Upon the other hand, the very rational thought occurred to him that another might see Mademoiselle d'Arlange, love her, and, in consequence, ask for and obtain her. In either case, hazarding a proposal, or hesitating still, he must certainly lose her in the end. By the commencement of spring, his mind was made up.

One fine afternoon, in the month of April, he bent his steps toward the residence of Madame d'Arlange, having truly need of more bravery than a soldier about to face a battery. He, like the soldier, whispered to himself, "Victory or death!" The marquise, who had gone out shortly after breakfast, had just

returned in a terrible rage, and was uttering screams like an eagle.

This was what had taken place. She had had some work done by a neighboring painter some eight or ten months before, and the workman had presented himself a hundred times to receive payment, without avail. Tired of this proceeding, he had summoned the high and mighty Marquise d'Arlange before the Justice of the Peace. This summons had exasperated the marquise; but she kept the matter to herself, having decided, in her wisdom, to call upon the judge and request him to reprimand the insolent painter who had dared to plague her for a paltry sum of money. The result of this fine project may be guessed. The judge had been compelled to eject her forcibly from his office; hence her fury.

M. Daburon found her in the rose-colored boudoir half undressed, her hair in disorder, red as a peony, and surrounded by the debris of the glass and china which had fallen under her hands in the first moments of her passion. Unfortunately, too, Claire and her governess were gone out. A maid was occupied in inundating the old lady with all sorts of waters, in the hope of calming her nerves. She received Daburon as a messenger direct from Providence. In a little more than half an hour she told her story, interlarded with numerous interjections and imprecations. "Do you comprehend this judge?" cried she. "He must be some frantic Jacobin—some son of the furies, who washed their hands in the blood of their king. Ah! my friend, I read stupor and indignation in your glance. He listened to the complaint of that impudent scoundrel whom I enabled to live by employing him! And when I addressed some severe remonstrances to this judge, as it was my duty to do, he had me turned out! Do you hear? turned out!" At this painful recollection she made a menacing gesture with her arm. In her sudden movement she struck a handsome scent bottle that her maid held in her hand. The force of the blow sent it to the other end of the room, where it broke into pieces. "Stupid, awkward fool!" cried the marquise, venting her anger upon the frightened girl. M. Daburon, bewildered at first, now endeavored to calm her exasperation. She did not allow him to pronounce three words. "Happily you are here," she continued; "you are always willing to serve me, I know. I count upon you! you will exercise your influence, your powerful friends, your credit, to have this pitiful painter and this mis-

creant of a judge flung into some deep ditch, to teach them the respect due to a woman of my rank."

The magistrate did not permit himself even to smile at this imperative demand. He had heard many speeches as absurd issue from her lips without ever making fun of them. Was she not Claire's grandmother? For that alone he loved and venerated her. He blessed her for her granddaughter, as an admirer of nature blesses heaven for the wild-flower that delights him with its perfume. The fury of the old lady was terrible; nor was it of short duration. At the end of an hour, however, she was, or appeared to be, pacified. They replaced her head-dress, repaired the disorder of her toilet, and picked up the fragments of broken glass and china. Vanquished by her own violence, the reaction was immediate and complete. She fell back helpless and exhausted into an armchair. This magnificent result was due to the magistrate. To accomplish it, he had had to use all his ability, to exercise the most angelic patience, the greatest tact. His triumph was the more meritorious because he came completely unprepared for this adventure, which interfered with his intended proposal. The first time that he had felt sufficient courage to speak, fortune seemed to declare against him, for this untoward event had quite upset his plans. Arming himself, however, with his professional eloquence, he talked the old lady into calmness. He was not so foolish as to contradict her. On the contrary, he caressed her hobby. He was humorous and pathetic by turns. He attacked the authors of the Revolution, cursed its errors, deplored its crimes, and almost wept over its disastrous results. Commencing with the infamous Marat, he eventually reached the rascal of a judge who had offended her. He abused his scandalous conduct in good set terms, and was exceedingly severe upon the dishonest scamp of a painter. However, he thought it best to let them off the punishment they so richly deserved; and ended by suggesting that it would perhaps be prudent, wise, noble even to pay.

The unfortunate word "pay" brought Madame d'Arlange to her feet in the fiercest attitude. "Pay!" she screamed. "In order that these scoundrels may persist in their obduracy! Encourage them by a culpable weakness! Never! Besides, to pay one must have money, and I have none!"

"Why!" said M. Daburon, "it amounts to but eighty-seven francs!"

"And is that nothing?" asked the marquise; "you talk very foolishly, my dear sir. It is easy to see that you have money; your ancestors were people of no rank, and the Revolution passed a hundred feet above their heads. Who can tell whether they may not have been the gainers by it? It took all from the D'Arlanges. What will they do to me if I do not pay?"

"Well, madame, they can do many things; almost ruin you in costs. They may seize your furniture."

"Alas!" cried the old lady, "the Revolution is not ended yet. We shall all be swallowed up by it, my poor Daburon! Ah! you are happy, you who belong to the people! I see plainly that I must pay this man without delay, and it is frightfully sad for me, for I have nothing, and am forced to make such sacrifices for the sake of my grandchild!"

This statement surprised the magistrate so strongly that involuntarily he repeated half-aloud: "Sacrifices?"

"Certainly!" resumed Madame d'Arlange. Without her, would I have to live as I am doing, refusing myself everything to make both ends meet? Not a bit of it! I would invest my fortune in a life annuity. But I know, thank heaven, the duties of a mother; and I economize all I can for my little Claire." This devotion appeared so admirable to M. Daburon that he could not utter a word. "Ah! I am terribly anxious about this dear child," continued the marquise. "I confess, M. Daburon, it makes me giddy when I wonder how I am to marry her."

The magistrate reddened with pleasure. At last his opportunity had arrived; he must take advantage of it at once. "It seems to me," stammered he, "that to find Mademoiselle Claire a husband ought not to be difficult."

"Unfortunately, it is. She is pretty enough, I admit, although rather thin, but, nowadays, beauty goes for nothing. Men are so mercenary they think only of money. I do not know of one who has the manhood to take a D'Arlange with her bright eyes for a dowry."

"I believe that you exaggerate," remarked M. Daburon, timidly.

"By no means. Trust to my experience, which is far greater than yours. Besides, when I find a son-in-law, he will cause me a thousand troubles. Of this I am assured by my lawyer. I shall be compelled, it seems, to render an account of Claire's patrimony. As if ever I kept accounts! It is shameful! Ah!

if Claire had any sense of filial duty, she would quietly take the veil in some convent. I would use every effort to pay the necessary dower; but she has no affection for me."

M. Daburon felt that now was the time to speak. He collected his courage, as a good horseman pulls his horse together when going to leap a hedge, and in a voice which he tried to render firm, he said: "Well! madame, I believe I know a man who would suit Mademoiselle Claire—an honest man, who loves her, and who will do everything in the world to make her happy."

"That," said Madame d'Arlange, "is always understood."

"The man of whom I speak," continued the magistrate, "is still young, and is rich. He will be only too happy to receive Mademoiselle Claire without a dowry. Not only will he decline an examination of your accounts of guardianship, but he will beg you to invest your fortune as you think fit."

"Really! Daburon, my friend, you are by no means a fool!" exclaimed the old lady.

"If you prefer not to invest your fortune in a life annuity, your son-in-law will allow you sufficient to make up what you now find wanting."

"Ah! really I am stifling," interrupted the marquise. "What! you know such a man, and have never yet mentioned him to me! You ought to have introduced him long ago."

"I did not dare, madame, I was afraid—"

"Quick! tell me who is this admirable son-in-law, this white blackbird? Where does he nestle?"

The magistrate felt a strange fluttering of the heart; he was going to stake his happiness on a word. At length he stammered: "It is I, madame!"

His voice, his look, his gesture was beseeching. He was surprised at his own audacity, frightened at having vanquished his timidity, and was on the point of falling at the old lady's feet. She, however, laughed until the tears came into her eyes, then shrugging her shoulders, she said: "Really, dear Daburon is too ridiculous, he will make me die of laughing! He is so amusing!" After which she burst out laughing again. But suddenly she stopped, in the very height of her merriment, and assumed her most dignified air. "Are you perfectly serious in all you have told me, M. Daburon?" she asked.

"I have stated the truth," murmured the magistrate.

"You are then very rich?"

"I inherited, madame, from my mother, about twenty thou-

sands francs a year. One of my uncles, who died last year, bequeathed me over a hundred thousand crowns. My father is worth about a million. Were I to ask him for the half to-morrow, he would give it to me; he would give me all his fortune, if it were necessary to my happiness, and be but too well contented should I leave him the administration of it."

Madame d'Arlange signed to him to be silent; and for five good minutes at least she remained plunged in reflection, her forehead resting in her hands. At length she raised her head. "Listen," said she. "Had you been so bold as to make this proposal to Claire's father, he would have called his servants to show you the door. For the sake of our name I ought to do the same; but I can not do so. I am old and desolate; I am poor; my grandchild's prospects disquiet me; that is my excuse. I can not, however, consent to speak to Claire of this horrible mésalliance. What I can promise you, and that is too much, is that I will not be against you. Take your own measures; pay your addresses to Mademoiselle d'Arlange, and try to persuade her. If she says 'yes' of her own free will, I shall not say 'no.'"

M. Daburon, transported with happiness, could almost have embraced the old lady. He thought her the best, the most excellent of women, not noticing the facility with which this proud spirit had been brought to yield. He was delirious, almost mad.

"Wait!" said the old lady; "your cause is not yet gained. Your mother, it is true, was a Cottevise, and I must excuse her for marrying so wretchedly; but your father is simple M. Daburon. This name, my dear friend, is simply ridiculous. Do you think it will be easy to make a Daburon of a young girl who for nearly eighteen years has been called D'Arlange?"

This objection did not seem to trouble the magistrate.

"After all," continued the old lady, "your father gained a Cottevise, so you may win a D'Arlange. On the strength of marrying into noble families, the Daburons may perhaps end by ennobling themselves. One last piece of advice; you believe Claire to be just as she looks—timid, sweet, obedient. Undeceive yourself, my friend. Despite her innocent air, she is hardy, fierce, and obstinate as the marquis, her father, who was worse than an Auvergne mule. Now you are warned. Our conditions are agreed to, are they not? Let us say no more on the subject. I almost wish you to succeed."

This scene was so present to the magistrate's mind that, as he sat at home in his armchair, though many months had passed since these events, he still seemed to hear the old lady's voice, and the word "success" still sounded in his ears. He departed in triumph from the D'Arlange abode, which he had entered with a heart swelling with anxiety. He walked with his head erect, his chest dilated, and breathing the fresh air with the full strength of his lungs. He was so happy! The sky appeared to him more blue, the sun more brilliant. This grave magistrate felt a mad desire to stop the passers-by, to press them in his arms, to cry to them: "Have you heard? The marquise consents!" He walked, and the earth seemed to him to give way beneath his footsteps; it was either too small to carry so much happiness, or else he had become so light that he was going to fly away toward the stars. What castles in the air he built upon what Madame d'Arlange had said to him! He would tender his resignation. He would build on the banks of the Loire, not far from Tours, an enchanting little villa. He already saw it, with its facade to the rising sun, nestling in the midst of flowers, and shaded with widespreading trees. He furnished this dwelling in the most luxuriant style. He wished to provide a marvelous casket, worthy the pearl he was about to possess. For he had not a doubt; not a cloud obscured the horizon made radiant by his hopes, no voice at the bottom of his heart raised itself to cry: "Beware!"

From that day, his visits to the marquise became more frequent. He might almost be said to live at her house. While he preserved his respectful and reserved demeanor toward Claire, he strove assiduously to be something in her life. True love is ingenuous. He learned to overcome his timidity, to speak to the well-beloved of his soul, to encourage her to converse with him, to interest her. He went in quest of all the news, to amuse her. He read all the new books, and brought to her all that were fit for her to read. Little by little he succeeded, thanks to the most delicate persistence, in taming this shy young girl. He began to perceive that her fear of him had almost disappeared, that she no longer received him with the cold and haughty air which had previously kept him at a distance. He felt that he was insensibly gaining her confidence. She still blushed when she spoke to him; but she no longer hesitated to address the first word. She even ventured at times to ask him a question. If she had heard a play well spoken of and wished

to know the subject, M. Daburon would at once go to see it, and commit a complete account of it to writing, which he would send her through the post. At times she intrusted him with trifling commissions, the execution of which he would not have exchanged for the Russian embassy. Once he ventured to send her a magnificent bouquet. She accepted it with an air of uneasy surprise, but begged him not to repeat the offering. The tears came to his eyes; he left her presence broken-hearted, and the unhappiest of men. "She does not love me," thought he; "she will never love me." But, three days later, as he looked very sad, she begged him to procure her certain flowers, then very much in fashion, which she wished to place on her flower-stand. He sent enough to fill the house from the garret to the cellar. "She will love me," he whispered to himself in his joy. These events, so trifling but yet so great, had not interrupted the games of piquet; only the young girl now appeared to interest herself in the play, nearly always taking the magistrate's side against the marquise. She did not understand the game very well; but, when the old gambler cheated too openly, she would notice it, and say, laughingly: "She is robbing you, M. Daburon—she is robbing you!" He would willingly have been robbed of his entire fortune to hear that sweet voice raised on his behalf.

It was summer-time. Often in the evening she accepted his arm, and, while the marquise remained at the window, seated in her armchair, they walked around the lawn, treading lightly upon the paths spread with gravel sifted so fine that the trailing of her light dress effaced the traces of their footsteps. She chatted gaily with him, as with a beloved brother, while he was obliged to do violence to his feelings, to refrain from imprinting a kiss upon the little blond head, from which the light breeze lifted the curls and scattered them like fleecy clouds. At such moments, he seemed to tread an enchanted path strewn with flowers, at the end of which appeared happiness. When he attempted to speak of his hopes to the marquise, she would say: "You know what we agreed upon. Not a word. Already does the voice of conscience reproach me for lending my countenance to such an abomination. To think that I may one day have a granddaughter calling herself Madame Daburon! You must petition the king, my friend, to change your name." If instead of intoxicating himself with dreams of happiness, this acute observer had studied the character of his idol, the effect

might have been to put him upon his guard. In the mean while, he noticed singular alterations in her humor. On certain days, she was gay and careless as a child. Then, for a week, she would remain melancholy and dejected. Seeing her in this state the day following a ball, to which her grandmother had made a point of taking her, he dared to ask her the reason of her sadness.

"Oh! that," answered she, heaving a deep sigh, "is my secret —a secret of which even my grandmother knows nothing."

M. Daburon looked at her. He thought he saw a tear between her long eyelashes.

"One day," continued she, "I may confide in you: it will perhaps be necessary."

The magistrate was blind and deaf. "I also," answered he, "have a secret, which I wish to confide to you in return."

When he retired toward midnight, he said to himself: "To-morrow I will confess everything to her." Then passed a little more than fifty days, during which he kept repeating to himself: "To-morrow!"

It happened at last one evening in the month of August; the heat all day had been overpowering; toward dusk a breeze had risen, the leaves rustled; there were signs of a storm in the atmosphere. They were seated together at the bottom of the garden, under the arbor, adorned with exotic plants, and, through the branches, they perceived the fluttering gown of the marquise, who was taking a turn after her dinner. They had remained a long time without speaking, enjoying the perfume of the flowers, the calm beauty of the evening. M. Daburon ventured to take the young girl's hand. It was the first time, and the touch of her fine skin thrilled through every fibre of his frame, and drove the blood surging to his brain. "Mademoiselle," stammered he, "Claire—"

She turned toward him her beautiful eyes, filled with astonishment.

"Forgive me," continued he—"forgive me. I have spoken to your grandmother, before daring to raise my eyes to you. Do you not understand me? A word from your lips will decide my future happiness or misery. Claire, mademoiselle, do not spurn me: I love you!"

While the magistrate was speaking, Mademoiselle d'Arlange looked at him as though doubtful of the evidence of her senses; but at the words, "I love you!" pronounced with the trembling

accents of the most devoted passion, she disengaged her hand sharply, and uttered a stifled cry. "You," murmured she, "is this really you?"

M. Daburon, at this the most critical moment of his life, was powerless to utter a word. The presentiment of an immense misfortune oppressed his heart. What were then his feelings when he saw Claire burst into tears? She hid her face in her hands, and kept repeating: "I am very unhappy, very unhappy!"

"You unhappy?" exclaimed the magistrate at length. "And through me. Claire, you are cruel! In heaven's name, what have I done? What is the matter? Speak! Anything rather than this anxiety which is killing me."

He knelt before her on the graveled walk, and again made an attempt to take her hand. She repulsed him with an imploring gesture. "Let me weep," said she; "I suffer so much, you are going to hate me, I feel it. Who knows! you will, perhaps, despise me, and yet I swear before heaven that I never expected what you have just said to me, that I had not even a suspicion of it!"

M. Daburon remained upon his knees, awaiting his doom.

"Yes," continued Claire, "you will think you have been the victim of a detestable coquetry. I see it now! I comprehend everything! It is not possible that, without a profound love, a man can be all that you have been to me. Alas! I was but a child. I gave myself up to the great happiness of having a friend! Am I not alone in the world, and as if lost in a desert? Silly and imprudent, I thoughtlessly confided in you, as in the best, the most indulgent of fathers."

These words revealed to the unfortunate magistrate the extent of his error. The same as a heavy hammer, they smashed into a thousand fragments the fragile edifice of his hopes. He raised himself slowly, and, in a tone of involuntary reproach, he repeated: "Your father!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange felt how deeply she had wounded this man whose intense love she dare not even fathom. "Yes," she resumed, "I love you as a father! Seeing you, usually so grave and austere, become for me so good, so indulgent, I thanked heaven for sending me a protector to replace those who are dead."

M. Daburon could not restrain a sob; his heart was breaking.

"One word," continued Claire—"one single word would have enlightened me. Why did you not pronounce it? It was with

such happiness that I leaned on you as a child on its mother; and with what inward joy I said to myself: 'I am sure of one friend, of one heart into which runs the overflow of mine!' Ah! why was not my confidence greater? Why did I withhold my secret from you? I might have avoided this fearful calamity. I ought to have told you long since. I no longer belong to myself freely and with happiness, I have given my life to another."

To hover in the clouds, and suddenly to fall rudely to the earth, such was M. Daburon's fate; his sufferings are not to be described. "Far better to have spoken," answered he; "yet, no. I owe to your silence, Claire, six months of delicious illusions, six months of enchanting dreams. This shall be my share of life's happiness."

The last beams of closing day still enabled the magistrate to see Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Her beautiful face had the whiteness and the immobility of marble. Heavy tears rolled silently down her cheeks. It seemed to M. Daburon that he was beholding the frightful spectacle of a weeping statue. "You love another," said he at length, "another! And your grandmother does not know it. Claire, you can only have chosen a man worthy of your love. How is it the marquise does not receive him?"

"There are certain obstacles," murmured Claire, "obstacles which perhaps we may never be able to remove; but a girl like me can love but once. She marries him she loves, or she belongs to heaven!"

"Certain obstacles!" said M. Daburon in a hollow voice. "You love a man, he knows it, and he is stopped by obstacles?"

"I am poor," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "and his family is immensely rich. His father is cruel, inexorable."

"His father," cried the magistrate, with a bitterness he did not dream of hiding, "his father, his family, and that withholds him! You are poor, he is rich, and that stops him! And yet he knows you love him! Ah! why am I not in his place? and why have I not the entire universe against me? What sacrifice can compare with love? such as I understand it. Nay, would it be a sacrifice? That which appears most so, is it not really an immense joy? To suffer, to struggle, to wait, to hope always, to devote one's self entirely to another; that is my idea of love."

"It is thus I love," said Claire with simplicity.

This answer crushed the magistrate. He could understand it. He knew that for him there was no hope; but he felt a terrible enjoyment in torturing himself, and proving his misfortune by intense suffering. "But," insisted he, "how have you know him, spoken to him? Where? When? Madame d'Arlange receives no one."

"I ought now to tell you everything, sir," answered Claire proudly. "I have known him for a long time. It was at the house of one of my grandmother's friends, who is a cousin of his—old Mademoiselle Goello, that I saw him for the first time. There we spoke to each other; there we meet each other now."

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Daburon, whose eyes were suddenly opened, "I remember now. A few days before your visit to Mademoiselle Goello, you are gayer than usual; and, when you return, you are often sad."

"That is because I see how much he is pained by the obstacles he can not overcome."

"Is his family, then, so illustrious," asked the magistrate harshly, "that it disdains alliance with yours?"

"I should have told you everything, without waiting to be questioned, sir," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "even his name. He is called Albert de Commarin."

The marquise at this moment, thinking she had walked enough, was preparing to return to her rose-colored boudoir. She therefore approached the arbor, and exclaimed in her loud voice: "Worthy magistrate, piquet awaits you."

Mechanically the magistrate arose, stammering, "I am coming."

Claire held him back. "I have not asked you to keep my secret, sir," she said.

"Oh, mademoiselle!" said M. Daburon, wounded by this appearance of doubt.

"I know," resumed Claire, "that I can count upon you; but, come what will, my tranquillity is gone." M. Daburon looked at her with an air of surprise; his eyes questioned her. "It is certain," continued she, "that when I, a young and inexperienced girl, have failed to see, has not passed unnoticed by my grandmother. That she has continued to receive you is a tacit encouragement of your addresses; which I consider, permit me to say, are very honorable to myself."

"I have already mentioned, mademoiselle," replied the magis-

trate, "that the marquise has deigned to authorize my hopes." And briefly he related his interview with Madame d'Arlange, having the delicacy, however, to omit absolutely the question of money, which had so strongly influenced the old lady.

"I see very plainly what effect this will have on my peace," said Claire sadly. "When my grandmother learns that I have not received your homage, she will be very angry."

"You misjudge me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon. "I have nothing to say to the marquise. I will retire, and all will be said. No doubt she will think that I have altered my mind!"

"Oh! you are good and generous, I know!"

"I will go away," pursued M. Daburon; "and soon you will have forgotten even the name of the unfortunate whose life's hopes have just been shattered."

"You do not mean what you say," said the young girl quickly.

"Well, no. I cherish this last illusion, that later on you will remember me with pleasure. Sometimes you will say, 'He loved me,' I wish all the same to remain your friend, yes, your most devoted friend."

Claire, in her turn, clasped M. Daburon's hands, and said with great emotion: "Yes, you are right, you must remain my friend. Let us forget what has happened, what you have said to-night, and remain to me, as in the past, the best, the most indulgent of brothers."

Darkness had come, and she could not see him; but she knew he was weeping, for he was slow to answer. "Is it possible," murmured he at length, "what you ask of me? What! is it you who talk to me of forgetting? Do you feel the power to forget? Do you not see that I love you a thousand times more than you love—" He stopped, unable to pronounce the name of Commarin; and then, with an effort he added: "And I shall love you always."

They had left the arbor, and were now standing not far from the steps leading to the house. "And now, mademoiselle," resumed M. Daburon, "permit me to say adieu! You will see me again but seldom. I shall only return often enough to avoid the appearance of a rupture." His voice trembled, so that it was with difficulty he made it distinct.

"Whatever may happen," he added, "remember that there is one unfortunate being in the world who belongs to you

absolutely. If ever you have need of a friend's devotion, come to me, come to your friend. Now it is over . . . I have courage. Claire, mademoiselle, for the last time, adieu!"

She was but little less moved than he was. Instinctively she approached him, and for the first and last time he touched lightly with his cold lips the forehead of her he loved so well. They mounted the steps, she leaning on his arm, and entered the rose-colored boudoir where the marquise was seated, impatiently shuffling the cards, while awaiting her victim. "Now, then, incorruptible magistrate," cried she.

But M. Daburon felt sick at heart. He could not have held the cards. He stammered some absurd excuses, spoke of pressing affairs, of duties to be attended to, of feeling suddenly unwell, and went out, clinging to the walls. His departure made the old card-player highly indignant. She turned to her granddaughter, who had gone to hide her confusion away from the candles of the card table, and asked, "What is the matter with Daburon this evening?"

"I do not know, madame," stammered Claire.

"It appears to me," continued the marquise, "that the little magistrate permits himself to take singular liberties. He must be reminded of his proper place, or he will end by believing himself our equal."

Claire tried to explain the magistrate's conduct: "He has been complaining all the evening, grandmama; perhaps he is unwell."

"And what if he is?" exclaimed the old lady. "Is it not his duty to exercise some self-denial, in return for the honor of our company? I think I have already related to you the story of your granduncle, the Duc de St. Huruge, who, having been chosen to join the king's card party on their return from the chase, played all through the evening and lost with the best grace in the world two hundred and twenty pistoles. All the assembly remarked his gaiety and his good humor. On the following day only it was learned, that, during the hunt, he had fallen from his horse, and had sat at his majesty's card table with a broken rib. Nobody made any remark, so perfectly natural did this act of ordinary politeness appear in those days. This little Daburon, if he is unwell, would have given proof of his breeding by saying nothing about it, and remaining for my piquet. But he is as well as I am. Who can tell what games he has gone to play elsewhere!"

VII

M. DABURON did not return home on leaving Mademoiselle d'Arlange. All through the night he wandered about at random, seeking to cool his heated brow, and to allay his excessive weariness. "Fool that I was!" said he to himself, "thousand times fool to have hoped, to have believed, that she would ever love me. Madman! how could I have dared to dream of possessing so much grace, nobleness, and beauty! How charming she was this evening, when her face was bathed in tears! Could anything be more angelic? What a sublime expression her eyes had in speaking of him! How she must love him! And I? She loves me as a father, she told me so—as a father! And could it be otherwise? Is it not justice? Could she see a lover in a sombre and severe-looking magistrate, always as sad as his black coat? Was it not a crime to dream of uniting that virginial simplicity to my detestable knowledge of the world? For her, the future is yet the land of smiling chimeras; and long since experience has dissipated all my illusions. She is young as innocence, and I am as old as vice."

The unfortunate magistrate felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. He understood Claire, and excused her. He reproached himself for having shown her how he suffered; for having cast a shadow upon her life. He could not forgive himself for having spoken of his love. Ought he not to have foreseen what had happened?—that she would refuse him, that he would thus deprive himself of the happiness of seeing her, of hearing her, and of silently adoring her? "A young and romantic girl," pursued he, "must have a lover she can dream of—whom she can caress in imagination, as an ideal, gratifying herself by seeing in him every great and brilliant quality, imagining him full of nobleness, of bravery, of heroism. What would she see, if, in my absence, she dreamed of me? Her imagination would present me dressed in a funeral robe, in the depth of a gloomy dungeon, engaged with some vile criminal.

Is it not my trade to descend into all moral sinks, to stir up the foulness of crime? Am I not compelled to wash in secrecy and darkness the dirty linen of the most corrupt members of society? Ah! some professions are fatal. Ought not the magistrate, like the priest, to condemn himself to solitude and celibacy? Both know all, they hear all, their costumes are nearly the same; but, while the priest carries consolation in the folds of his black robe, the magistrate conveys terror. One is mercy, the other chastisement. Such are the images a thought of me would awaken; while the other—the other—"

The wretched man continued his headlong course along the deserted quays. He went with his head bare, his eyes haggard. To breathe more freely, he had torn off his cravat and thrown it to the winds. Sometimes, unconsciously, he crossed the path of a solitary wayfarer, who would pause, touched with pity, and turn to watch the retreating figure of the unfortunate wretch he thought deprived of reason. In a by-road, near Grenelle, some police officers stopped him, and tried to question him. He mechanically tendered them his card. They read it, and permitted him to pass, convinced that he was drunk. Anger —a furious anger—began to replace his first feeling of resignation. In his heart arose a hate, stronger and more violent than even his love for Claire. That other, that preferred one, that haughty vicomte, who could not overcome those paltry obstacles, oh, that he had him there, under his knee! At that moment, this noble and proud man, this severe and grave magistrate, experienced an irresistible longing for vengeance. He began to understand the hate that arms itself with a knife, and lies in ambush in out-of-the-way places; which strikes in the dark, whether in front or from behind matters little, but which strikes, which kills, whose vengeance blood alone can satisfy. At that very hour he was supposed to be occupied with an inquiry into the case of an unfortunate, accused of having stabbed one of her wretched companions. She was jealous of the woman, who had tried to take her lover from her. He was a soldier, coarse in manners, and always drunk. M. Daburon felt himself seized with pity for this miserable creature, whom he had commenced to examine the day before. She was very ugly, in fact truly repulsive; but the expression of the eyes, when speaking of her soldier, returned to the magistrate's memory. "She loves him sincerely," thought he. "If each one of the jurors had suffered what I am suffering now, she would

be acquitted. But how many men in this world have loved passionately? Perhaps not one in twenty." He resolved to recommend this girl to the indulgence of the tribunal, and to extenuate as much as possible her guilt. For he himself had just determined upon the commission of a crime. He was resolved to kill Albert de Commarin.

During the rest of the night he became all the more determined in this resolution, demonstrating to himself by a thousand mad reasons, which he found solid and inscrutable, the necessity for and the justifiableness of this vengeance. At seven o'clock in the morning, he found himself in an avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, not far from the lake. He made at once for the Porte Maillot, procured a cab, and was driven to his house. The delirium of the night continued, but without suffering. He was conscious of no fatigue. Calm and cool, he acted under the power of a hallucination, almost like a somnambulist. He reflected and reasoned, but without his reason. As soon as he arrived home he dressed himself with care, as was his custom formerly when visiting the Marquise d'Arlange, and went out. He first called at an armorer's and bought a small revolver, which he caused to be carefully loaded under his own eyes, and put it into his pocket. He then called on the different persons he supposed capable of informing him to what club the vicomte belonged. No one noticed the strange state of his mind, so natural were his manners and conversation. It was not until the afternoon that a young friend of his gave him the name of Albert de Commarin's club, and offered to conduct him thither, as he too was a member. M. Daburon accepted warmly, and accompanied his friend. While passing along, he grasped with frenzy the handle of the revolver which he kept concealed, thinking only of the murder he was determined to commit, and the means of insuring the accuracy of his aim. "This will make a terrible scandal," thought he, "above all if I do not succeed in blowing my own brains out. I shall be arrested, thrown into prison, and placed upon my trial at the assizes. My name will be dishonored! Bah! what does that signify? Claire does not love me, so what care I for all the rest? My father no doubt will die of grief, but I must have my revenge!"

On arriving at the club, his friend pointed out a very dark young man, with a haughty air, or what appeared so to him, who, seated at a table, was reading a review. It was the vi-

comte. M. Daburon walked up to him without drawing his revolver. But within two paces, his heart failed him; he turned suddenly and fled, leaving his friend astonished at a scene, to him, utterly inexplicable. Only once again will Albert de Commarin be as near death. On reaching the street, it seemed to M. Daburon that the ground was receding from beneath him, that everything was turning around him. He tried to cry out, but could not utter a sound; he struck at the air with his hands, reeled for an instant, and then fell all of a heap on the pavement. The passers-by ran and assisted the police to raise him. In one of his pockets they found his address, and carried him home.

When he recovered his senses, he was in his bed, at the foot of which he perceived his father. "What has happened?" he asked. With much caution they told him that for six weeks he had wavered between life and death. The doctors had declared his life saved; and, now that reason was restored, all would go well. Five minutes' conversation exhausted him. He shut his eyes, and tried to collect his ideas; but they whirled hither and thither wildly, as autumn leaves in the wind. The past seemed shrouded in a dark mist; yet, in the midst of the darkness and confusion, all that concerned Mademoiselle d'Arlange stood out clear and luminous. All his actions from the moment when he embraced Claire appeared before him. He shuddered, and his hair was in a moment soaking with perspiration. He had almost become an assassin. The proof that he was restored to full possession of his faculties was that a question of criminal law crossed his brain. "The crime committed," said he to himself, "should I have been condemned? Yes. Was I responsible? No. Is crime merely the result of mental alienation? Was I mad? Or was I in that peculiar state of mind which usually precedes an illegal attempt? Who can say? Why have not all judges passed through an incomprehensible crisis such as mine? But who would believe me, were I to recount my experience?"

Some days later, he was sufficiently recovered to tell his father all. The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders, and assured him it was but a reminiscence of his delirium. The good old man was moved at the story of his son's luckless wooing, without seeing therein, however, an irreparable misfortune. He advised him to think of something else, placed at his disposal his entire fortune, and recommended him to marry a stout

Poitevine heiress, very gay and healthy, who would bear him some fine children. Then, as his estate was suffering by his absence, he returned home. Two months later, the investigating magistrate had resumed his ordinary avocations. But try as he would, he only went through his duties like a body without a soul. He felt that something was broken. Once he ventured to pay a visit to his old friend, the marquise. On seeing him, she uttered a cry of terror. She took him for a spectre, so much was he changed in appearance. As she dreaded dismal faces, she ever after shut her door to him. Claire was ill for a week after seeing him. "How he loved me," thought she; "it has almost killed him! Can Albert love me as much?" She did not dare to answer herself. She felt a desire to console him, to speak to him, attempt something; but he came no more.

M. Daburon was not, however, a man to give way without a struggle. He tried, as his father advised him, to distract his thoughts. He sought for pleasure, and found disgust, but not forgetfulness. Often he went as far as the threshold of debauchery; but the pure figure of Claire, dressed in white garments, always barred the doors against him. Then he took refuge in work, as in a sanctuary; condemned himself to the most incessant labor, and forbade himself to think of Claire, as the consumptive forbids himself to meditate upon his malady. His eagerness, his feverish activity, earned him the reputation of an ambitious man, who would go far; but he cared for nothing in the world. At length, he found, not rest, but that painless benumbing which commonly follows a great catastrophe. The convalescence of oblivion was commencing.

These were the events, recalled to M. Daburon's mind when old Tabaret pronounced the name of Commarin. He believed them buried under the ashes of time; and behold they reappeared, just the same as those characters traced in sympathetic ink when held before a fire. In an instant they unrolled themselves before his memory, with the instantaneousness of a dream annihilating time and space. During some minutes, he assisted at the representation of his own life. At once actor and spectator, he was there seated in his armchair, and at the same time he appeared on the stage. He acted, and he judged himself. His first thought, it must be confessed, was one of hate, followed by a detestable feeling of satisfaction. Chance had, so to say, delivered into his hands this man preferred by Claire, this man, now no longer a haughty nobleman, illus-

trious by his fortune and his ancestors, but the illegitimate offspring of a courtezan. To retain a stolen name, he had committed a most cowardly assassination. And he, the magistrate, was about to experience the infinite gratification of striking his enemy with the sword of justice. But this was only a passing thought. The man's upright conscience revolted against it, and made its powerful voice heard. "Is anything," it cried, "more monstrous than the association of these two ideas—hatred and justice? Can a magistrate, without despising himself more than he despises the vile beings he condemns, recollect that a criminal, whose fate is in his hands, has been his enemy? Has an investigating magistrate the right to make use of his exceptional powers in dealing with a prisoner, so long as he harbors the least resentment against him?" M. Daburon repeated to himself what he had so frequently thought during the year, when commencing a fresh investigation: "And I also, I almost stained myself with a vile murder!" And now it was his duty to cause to be arrested, to interrogate, and hand over to the assizes the man he had once resolved to kill. All the world, it is true, ignored this crime of thought and intention; but could he himself forget it? Was not this, of all others, a case in which he should decline to be mixed up? Ought he not to withdraw, and wash his hands of the blood that had been shed, leaving to another the task of avenging him in the name of society? "No," said he, "it would be a cowardice unworthy of me." A project of mad generosity occurred to the bewildered man. "If I save him," murmured he, "if for Claire's sake I leave him his honor and his life. But how can I save him? To do so I shall be obliged to suppress old Tabaret's discoveries, and make an accomplice of him by ensuring his silence. We shall have to follow a wrong track, join Gevrol in running after some imaginary murderer. Is this practicable? Besides, to spare Albert is to defame Noel; it is to assure impunity to the most odious of crimes. In short, it is still sacrificing justice to my feelings."

The magistrate suffered greatly. How choose a path in the midst of so many perplexities! Impelled by different interests, he wavered, undecided between the most opposite decisions, his mind oscillating from one extreme to the other. What could he do? His reason after this new and unforeseen shock vainly sought to regain its equilibrium. "Resign?" said he to himself. "Where, then, would be my courage? Ought I not rather to remain the representative of the law, incapable of emotion, in-

sensible to prejudice? Am I so weak that, in assuming my office, I am unable to divest myself of my personality? Can I not, for the present, make abstraction of the past? My duty is to pursue this investigation. Claire herself would desire me to act thus. Would she wed a man suspected of a crime? Never. If he is innocent, he will be saved; if guilty, let him perish!" This was very sound reasoning; but, at the bottom of his heart, a thousand disquietudes darted their thorns. He wanted to reassure himself. "Do I still hate this young man?" he continued. "No, certainly. If Claire has preferred him to me, it is to Claire and not to him I owe my suffering. My rage was no more than a passing fit of delirium. I will prove it by letting him find me as much a counselor as a magistrate. If he is not guilty, he shall make use of all the means in my power to establish his innocence. Yes, I am worthy to be his judge. Heaven, who reads all my thoughts, sees that I love Claire enough to desire with all my heart the innocence of her lover." Only then did M. Daburon seem to be vaguely aware of the lapse of time. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. "Goodness!" cried he; "why, old Tabaret is waiting for me. I shall probably find him asleep."

But M. Tabaret was not asleep. He had noticed the passage of time no more than the magistrate. Ten minutes had sufficed him to take an inventory of the contents of M. Daburon's study, which was large, and handsomely furnished in accordance with his position and fortune. Taking up a lamp, he first admired six very valuable pictures, which ornamented the walls; he then examined with considerable curiosity some rare bronzes placed about the room, and bestowed on the bookcase the glance of a connoisseur. After which, taking an evening paper from the table, he approached the hearth, and seated himself in a vast armchair. He had not read a third of the leading article, which, like all leading articles of the time, was exclusively occupied with the Roman question, when, letting the paper drop from his hands, he became absorbed in meditation. The fixed idea, stronger than one's will, and more interesting to him than politics, brought him forcibly back to La Jonchere, where lay the body of Widow Lerouge. Like the child who again and again builds up and demolishes his house of cards, he arranged and entangled alternately his chain of inductions and arguments. In his own mind there was certainly no longer a doubt as regards this sad affair, and it seemed to him that M. Dabu-

ron shared his opinions. But yet, what difficulties there still remained to encounter! There exists between the investigating magistrate and the accused a supreme tribunal, an admirable institution which is a guarantee for all, a powerful moderator, the jury. And the jury, thank heaven! do not content themselves with a moral conviction. The strongest probabilities can not induce them to give an affirmative verdict. The accusation must then come before the jury, armed at all points, with abundant proofs. A task often tedious to the investigating magistrate, and bristling with difficulties, is the arrangement and condensation of this evidence, particularly when the accused is a cool hand, certain of having left no traces of his guilt. Even when presumptive evidence points clearly to the criminal, and common sense recognizes him, justice is at times compelled to acknowledge her defeat, for lack of what the jury consider sufficient proof of guilt. Thus, unhappily, many crimes escape punishment. An old advocate-general said one day that he knew as many as three assassins, living rich, happy, and respected, who would probably end by dying in their beds, surrounded by their families, and being followed to the grave with lamentations, and praised for their virtues in their epitaphs.

At the idea that a murderer might escape the penalty of his crime, and steal away from the assize court, old Tabaret's blood fairly boiled in his veins, as at the recollection of some deadly insult. Such a monstrous event, in his opinion, could only proceed from the incapacity of those charged with the preliminary inquiry, the clumsiness of the police, or the stupidity of the investigating magistrate. "It is not I," he muttered, with the satisfied vanity of success, "who would ever let my prey escape. No crime can be committed, of which the author can not be found, unless, indeed, he happens to be a madman, whose motive it would be difficult to understand. I would pass my life in pursuit of a criminal, before avowing myself vanquished, as Gevrol has done so many times." Assisted by chance, he had again succeeded, so he kept repeating to himself, but what proofs could he furnish to the accusation, to that confounded jury, so difficult to convince, so precise and so cowardly? What could he imagine to force so cunning a culprit to betray himself? What trap could he prepare? To what new and infallible stratagem could he have recourse? The amateur detective exhausted himself in subtle but impracticable combinations, always stopped by that exacting jury, so

obnoxious to the agents of the Rue de Jerusalem. He was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the door open, and was utterly unconscious of the magistrate's presence.

M. Daburon's voice aroused him from his reverie. "You will excuse me, M. Tabaret, for having left you so long alone."

The old fellow rose and bowed respectfully. "By my faith, sir," replied he, "I have not had the leisure to perceive my solitude."

M. Daburon crossed the room, and seated himself, facing his agent before a small table encumbered with papers and documents relating to the crime. He appeared very much fatigued. "I have reflected a good deal," he commenced, "about this affair—"

"And I," interrupted old Tabaret, "was just asking myself what was likely to be the attitude assumed by the vicomte at the moment of his arrest. Nothing is more important, according to my idea, than his manner of conducting himself then. Will he fly into a passion? Will he attempt to intimidate the agents? Will he threaten to turn them out of the house? These are generally the tactics of titled criminals. My opinion, however, is that he will remain perfectly cool. He will declare himself the victim of a misunderstanding, and insist upon an immediate interview with the investigating magistrate. Once that is accorded him, he will explain everything very quickly."

The old fellow spoke of matters of speculation in such a tone of assurance that M. Daburon was unable to repress a smile. "We have not got as far as that yet," said he.

"But we shall, in a few hours," replied M. Tabaret quickly. "I presume you will order young M. de Commarin's arrest at daybreak."

The magistrate trembled, like the patient who sees the surgeon deposit his case of instruments upon the table on entering the room. The moment for action had come. He felt what a distance lies between a mental decision and the physical action required to execute it. "You are prompt, M. Tabaret," said he; "you recognize no obstacles."

"None, having ascertained the criminal. Who else can have committed this assassination? Who but he had an interest in silencing Widow Lerouge, in suppressing her testimony, in destroying her papers? He, and only he. Poor Noel! who is as dull as honesty, warned him, and he acted. Should we fail

to establish his guilt, he will remain De Commarin more than ever; and my young barrister will be Noel Gerdy to the grave."

"Yes, but—"

The old man fixed his eyes upon the magistrate with a look of astonishment. "You see, then, some difficulties, sir?" he asked.

"Most decidedly!" replied M. Daburon. "This is a matter demanding the utmost circumspection. In cases like the present, one must not strike until the blow is sure, and we have but presumptions. Suppose we are mistaken. Justice, unhappily, can not repair errors. Her hand once unjustly placed upon a man, leaves an imprint of dishonor that can never be effaced. She may perceive her error, and proclaim it aloud, but in vain! Public opinion, absurd and idiotic, will not pardon the man guilty of being suspected."

It was with a sinking heart that the old fellow listened to these remarks. He would not be withheld by such paltry considerations.

"Our suspicions are well grounded," continued the magistrate. "But, should they lead us into error, our precipitation would be a terrible misfortune for this young man, to say nothing of the effect it would have in abridging the authority and dignity of justice, of weakening the respect which constitutes her power. Such a mistake would call for discussion, provoke examination, and awaken distrust, at an epoch in our history when all minds are but too much disposed to defy the constituted authorities."

He leaned upon the table, and appeared to reflect profoundly. "I have no luck," thought old Tabaret. "I have to do with a trembler. When he should act, he makes speeches; instead of signing warrants, he propounds theories. He is astounded at my discovery, and is not equal to the situation. Instead of being delighted by my appearance with the news of our success, he would have given a twenty-franc piece, I dare say, to have been left undisturbed. Ah! he would very willingly have the little fishes in his net, but the big ones frighten him. The big fishes are dangerous, and he prefers to let them swim away."

"Perhaps," said M. Daburon, aloud, "it will suffice to issue a search-warrant, and a summons for the appearance of the accused."

"Then all is lost!" cried old Tabaret.

"And why, pray?"

"Because we are opposed by a criminal of marked ability. A most providential accident has placed us upon his track. If we give him time to breathe, he will escape."

The only answer was an inclination of the head, which M. Daburon may have intended for a sign of assent.

"It is evident," continued the old fellow, "that our adversary has foreseen everything, absolutely everything, even the possibility of suspicion attaching to one in his high position. Oh! his precautions are all taken. If you are satisfied with demanding his appearance, he is saved. He will appear before you as tranquilly as your clerk, as unconcerned as if he came to arrange the preliminaries of a duel. He will present you with a magnificent alibi, an alibi that can not be gainsaid. He will show you that he passed the evening and the night of Tuesday with personages of the highest rank. In short, his little machine will be so cleverly constructed, so nicely arranged, all its little wheels will play so well, that there will be nothing left for you but to open the door and usher him out with the most humble apologies. The only means of securing conviction is to surprise the miscreant by a rapidity against which it is impossible he can be on his guard. Fall upon him like a thunderclap, arrest him as he wakes, drag him hither while yet pale with astonishment, and interrogate him at once. Ah! I wish I were an investigating magistrate."

Old Tabaret stopped short, frightened at the idea that he had been wanting in respect; but M. Daburon showed no sign of being offended. "Proceed," said he, in a tone of encouragement, "proceed."

"Suppose, then," continued the detective, "I am the investigating magistrate. I cause my man to be arrested, and, twenty minutes later, he is standing before me. I do not amuse myself by putting questions to him, more or less subtle. No, I go straight to the mark. I overwhelm him at once by the weight of my certainty, prove to him so clearly that I know everything, that he must surrender, seeing no chance of escape. I should say to him: 'My good man, you bring me an alibi; it is very well; but I am acquainted with that system of defense. It will not do with me. I know all about the clocks that don't keep proper time, and all the people who never lost sight of you. In the mean time, this is what you did. At twenty minutes past eight, you slipped away adroitly; at thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St. Lazare station; at nine

o'clock, you alighted at the station at Rueil, and took the road to La Jonchere; at a quarter past nine, you knocked at the window-shutter of Widow Lerouge's cottage. You were admitted. You asked for something to eat, and, above all, something to drink. At twenty minutes past nine, you planted the well-sharpened end of a foil between her shoulders. You killed her! You then overturned everything in the house, and burned certain documents of importance; after which, you tied up in a napkin all the valuables you could find, and carried them off, to lead the police to believe the murder was the work of a robber. You locked the door, and threw away the key. Arrived at the Seine, you threw the bundle into the water, then hurried off to the railway station on foot, and at eleven o'clock you reappeared among your friends. Your game was well played; but you omitted to provide against two adversaries, a detective, not easily deceived, named Tirauclair, and another still more clever, named chance. Between them, they have got the better of you. Moreover, you were foolish to wear such small boots, and to keep on your lavender kid gloves, besides embarrassing yourself with a silk hat and an umbrella. Now confess your guilt, for it is the only thing left you to do, and I will give you permission to smoke in your dungeon some of those excellent trabucos you are so fond of, and which you always smoke with an amber mouthpiece.'" During this speech, M. Tabaret had gained at least a couple of inches in height, so great was his enthusiasm. He looked at the magistrate, as if expecting a smile of approbation. "Yes," continued he, after taking breath, "I would say that, and nothing else; and, unless this man is a hundred times stronger than I suppose him to be, unless he is made of bronze, of marble, or of steel, he would fall at my feet and avow his guilt."

"But supposing he were of bronze," said M. Daburon, "and did not fall at your feet, what would you do next?"

The question evidently embarrassed the old fellow. "Pshaw!" stammered he; "I don't know; I would see; I would search; but he would confess."

After a prolonged silence, M. Daburon took a pen, and hurriedly wrote a few lines. "I surrender," said he. "M. Albert de Commarin shall be arrested; that is settled. The different formalities to be gone through and the perquisitions will occupy some time, which I wish to employ in interrogating the Comte de Commarin, the young man's father, and your friend, M.

Noel Gerdy, the young barrister. The letters he possesses are indispensable to me."

At the name of Gerdy, M. Tabaret's face assumed a most comical expression of uneasiness. "Confound it," cried he, "the very thing I most dreaded."

"What?" asked M. Daburon.

"The necessity for the examination of those letters. Noel will discover my interference. He will despise me: he will fly from me, when he knows that Tabaret and Tirauclair sleep in the same nightcap. Before eight days are past, my oldest friends will refuse to shake hands with me, as if it were not an honor to serve justice. I shall be obliged to change my residence, and assume a false name."

He almost wept, so great was his annoyance. M. Daburon was touched. "Reassure yourself, my dear M. Tabaret," said he. "I will manage that your adopted son, your Benjamin, shall know nothing. I will lead him to believe I have reached him by means of the widow's papers."

The old fellow seized the magistrate's hand in a transport of gratitude, and carried it to his lips. Oh! thanks, sir, a thousand thanks! I should like to be permitted to witness the arrest; and I shall be glad to assist at the perquisitions."

"I intended to ask you to do so, M. Tabaret," answered the magistrate. The lamps paled in the gray dawn of the morning; already the rumbling of vehicles was heard; Paris was awaking. "I have no time to lose," continued M. Daburon, "if I would have all my measures well taken. I must at once see the public prosecutor, whether he is up or not. I shall go direct from his house to the Palais de Justice, and be there before eight o'clock; and I desire, M. Tabaret, that you will there await my orders."

The old fellow bowed his thanks and was about to leave, when the magistrate's servant appeared. "Here is a note, sir," said he, "which a gendarme has just brought from Bougival. He waits an answer."

"Very well," replied M. Daburon. "Ask the man to have some refreshment; at least offer him a glass of wine."

He opened the envelope. "Ah!" he cried, "a letter from Gevrol;" and he read: " 'To the investigating magistrate. Sir, I have the honor to inform you that I am on the track of the man with the earrings. I heard of him at a wine-shop, which he entered on Sunday morning, before going to Widow Le-

rouge's cottage. He bought and paid for two litres of wine; then, suddenly striking his forehead, he cried: "Old fool! to forget that to-morrow is the boat's fete day!" and immediately called for three more litres. According to the almanac the boat must be called the "Saint-Marin." I have also learned that she was laden with grain. I write to the Prefecture at the same time as I write to you, that inquiries may be made at Paris and Rouen. He will be found at one of those places. I am in waiting, sir,' etc."

"Poor Gevrol!" cried old Tabaret, bursting with laughter. "He sharpens his sabre, and the battle is over. Are you not going to put a stop to his inquiries, sir?"

"No; certainly not," answered M. Daburon; "to neglect the slightest clue often leads one into error. Who can tell what light we may receive from this mariner?"

VIII

ON the same day that the crime of La Jonchere was discovered, and precisely at the hour that M. Tabaret made his memorable examination in the victim's chamber, the Vicomte Albert de Commarin entered his carriage, and proceeded to the Northern Railway station, to meet his father. The young man was very pale: his pinched features, his dull eyes, his blanched lips, in fact, his whole appearance, denoted either overwhelming fatigue or unusual sorrow. All the servants had observed that, during the past five days, their young master had not been in his ordinary condition: he spoke but little, ate almost nothing, and refused to see any visitors. His valet noticed that this singular change dated from the visit, on Sunday morning, of a certain M. Noel Gerdy, who had been closeted with him for three hours in the library. The vicomte, gay as a lark until the arrival of this person, had, from the moment of his departure, the appearance of a man at the point of death. When setting forth to meet his father, the vicomte appeared to suffer so acutely that M. Lubin, his valet, entreated him not to go out; suggesting that it would be more prudent to retire to his room,

and call in the doctor. But the Comte de Commarin was exacting on the score of filial duty, and would overlook the worst of youthful indiscretions sooner than what he termed a want of reverence. He had announced his intended arrival by telegraph, twenty-four hours in advance; therefore the house was expected to be in perfect readiness to receive him, and the absence of Albert at the railway station would have been resented as a flagrant omission of duty. The vicomte had been but five minutes in the waiting-room, when the bell announced the arrival of the train. Soon the doors leading on to the platform were opened, and the travelers crowded in. The throng beginning to thin a little, the comte appeared, followed by a servant, who carried a traveling pelisse lined with rare and valuable fur.

The Comte de Commarin looked a good ten years less than his age. His beard and hair, yet abundant, were scarcely gray. He was tall and muscular, held himself upright, and carried his head high. His appearance was noble, his movements easy. His regular features presented a study to the physiognomist, all expressing easy, careless good nature, even to the handsome, smiling mouth; but in his eyes flashed the fiercest and the most arrogant pride. This contrast revealed the secret of his character. Imbued quite as deeply with aristocratic prejudice as the Marquise d'Arlange, he had progressed with his century or at least appeared to have done so. As fully as the marquise, he held in contempt all who were not noble; but his disdain expressed itself in a different fashion. The marquise proclaimed her contempt loudly and coarsely; the comte had kept eyes and ears open and had seen and heard a good deal. She was stupid, and without a shade of common sense. He was witty and sensible, and possessed enlarged views of life and politics. She dreamed of the return of the absurd traditions of a former age; he hoped for things within the power of events to bring forth. He was sincerely persuaded that the nobles of France would yet recover slowly and silently, but surely, all their lost power, with its prestige and influence. In a word, the comte was the flattered portrait of his class; the marquise its caricature. It should be added that M. de Commarin knew how to divest himself of his crushing urbanity in the company of his equals. There he recovered his true character, haughty, self-sufficient, and intractable, enduring contradiction pretty much as a wild horse the application of the spur. In his own house, he was a despot.

Perceiving his father, Albert advanced toward him. They shook hands and embraced with an air as noble as ceremonious, and, in less than a minute, had exchanged all the news that had transpired during the comte's absence. Then only did M. de Commarin perceive the alteration in his son's face. "You are unwell, vicomte," said he.

"Oh, no, sir," answered Albert, laconically.

The comte uttered "Ah!" accompanied by a certain movement of the head, which, with him, expressed perfect incredulity; then, turning to his servant, he gave him some orders briefly. "Now," resumed he, "let us go quickly to the house. I am in haste to feel at home; and I am hungry, having had nothing to-day but some detestable broth, at I know not what way station."

M. de Commarin had returned to Paris in a very bad temper, his journey to Austria had not brought the results he had hoped for. To crown his dissatisfaction, he had rested, on his homeward way, at the chateau of an old friend, with whom he had had so violent a discussion that they had parted without shaking hands. The comte was hardly seated in his carriage before he entered upon the subject of this disagreement. "I have quarreled with the Duc de Sairmeuse," said he to his son.

"That seems to me to happen whenever you meet," answered Albert, without intending any raillery.

"True," said the comte: "but this is serious. I passed four days at his country-seat, in a state of inconceivable exasperation. He has entirely forfeited my esteem. Sairmeuse has sold his estate of Gondresy, one of the finest in the north of France. He has cut down the timber, and put up to auction the old chateau, a princely dwelling, which is to be converted into a sugar refinery; all this for the purpose, as he says, of raising money to increase his income!"

"And was that the cause of your rupture?" inquired Albert, without much surprise.

"Certainly it was! Do you not think it is a sufficient one?"

"But, sir, you know the duke has a large family, and is far from rich."

"What of that? A French noble who sells his land commits an unworthy act. He is guilty of treason against his order!"—

"Oh, sir," said Albert, deprecatingly.

"I said treason!" continued the comte. "I maintain the word. Remember well, vicomte, power has been, and always will be,

on the side of wealth, especially on the side of those who hold the soil. The men of '93 well understood this principle, and acted upon it. By impoverishing the nobles, they destroyed their prestige more effectually than by abolishing their titles. A prince dismounted, and without footmen, is no more than any one else."

The carriage at this moment stopped in the courtyard of the De Commarin mansion, after having described that perfect half-circle, the glory of coachmen who preserve the old tradition. The comte alighted first, and, leaning upon his son's arm, ascended the steps of the grand entrance. In the immense vestibule nearly all the servants, dressed in rich liveries, stood in a line. The comte gave them a glance in passing, as an officer might his soldiers on parade, and proceeded to his apartment on the first floor, above the reception rooms. Never was there a better regulated household than that of the Comte de Commarin. He possessed in a high degree the art, more rare than is generally supposed, of commanding an army of servants. The number of his domestics caused him neither inconvenience nor embarrassment. They were necessary to him. So perfect was the organization of this household that its functions were performed like those of a machine: without noise, variation, or effort.

M. de Commarin had hardly removed the traces of his journey, and changed his dress, when his butler announced that the dinner was served. He went down at once; and father and son met upon the threshold of the dining-room. This was a large apartment, with a very high ceiling, as were all the rooms of the ground floor, and was most magnificently furnished. The comte was not only a great eater, but was vain of his enormous appetite. He was fond of recalling the names of great men noted for their capacity of stomach. Charles V devoured mountains of viands. Louis XIV swallowed at each repast as much as six ordinary men would eat at a meal. He pretended that one can almost judge of men's qualities by their digestive capacities; he compared them to lamps, whose power of giving light is in proportion to the oil they consume. During the first half-hour the comte and his son both remained silent. M. de Commarin ate conscientiously, not perceiving or not caring to notice that Albert ate nothing, but merely sat at the table as if to countenance him. The old nobleman's ill-humor and volubility returned with the dessert, apparently increased by a Burgundy of which he was particularly fond, and of which he

drank freely. He was partial, moreover, to an after-dinner argument, professing a theory that moderate discussion is a perfect digestive. A letter which had been delivered to him on his arrival, and which he had found time to glance over, gave him at once a subject and a point of departure. "I arrived home but an hour ago," said he, "and I have already received a homily from Broisfresnay."

"He writes a great deal," observed Albert.

"Too much; he consumes himself in ink. He mentions a lot more of his ridiculous projects and vain hopes; and he mentions a dozen names of men of his own stamp who are his associates. On my word of honor, they seem to have lost their senses! They talk of lifting the world, only they want a lever and something to rest it on. It makes me die with laughter!" For ten minutes the comte continued to discharge a volley of abuse and sarcasm against his best friends without seeming to see that a great many of their foibles which he ridiculed were also a little his own. "If," continued he more seriously—"if they only possessed a little confidence in themselves, if they showed the least audacity! But no! they count upon others to do for them what they ought to do for themselves. In short, their proceedings are a series of confessions of helplessness, of premature declarations of failure."

The coffee having been served, the comte made a sign, and the servants left the room.

"No," continued he; "I see but one hope for the French aristocracy, but one plank of salvation, one good little law, establishing the right of primogeniture."

"You will never obtain it."

"You think not? Would you then oppose such a measure, vicomte?" Albert knew by experience what dangerous ground his father was approaching, and remained silent. "Let us put it, then, that I dream of the impossible!" resumed the comte. "Then let the nobles do their duty. Let all the younger sons and the daughters of our great families forego their rights, by giving up their entire patrimony to the first-born for five generations, contenting themselves each with a couple of thousand francs a year. By that means great fortunes can be reconstructed, and families, instead of being divided by a variety of interests, become united by one common desire."

"Unfortunately," objected the vicomte, "the time is not favorable to such devotedness."

"I know it, sir," replied the comte quickly; "and in my own house I have the proof of it. I, your father, have conjured you to give up all idea of marrying the granddaughter of that old fool, the Marquise d'Arlange. And all to no purpose; for I have at last been obliged to yield to your wishes."

"Father—" Albert commenced. "It is well," interrupted the comte. "You have my word; but remember my prediction: you will strike a fatal blow at our house. You will be one of the largest proprietors in France; but have half a dozen children, and they will be hardly rich. If they also have as many, you will probably see your grandchildren in poverty!"

"You put all at the worst, father."

"Without doubt: it is the only means of pointing out the danger and averting the evil. You talk of your life's happiness. What is that? A true noble thinks of his name above all. Mademoiselle d'Arlange is very pretty and very attractive, but she is penniless. I had found an heiress for you."

"Whom I should never love!"

"And what of that? She would have brought you four millions in her apron—more than the kings of to-day give their daughters. Besides which she had great expectations."

The discussion upon this subject would have been interminable had Albert taken an active share in it; but his thoughts were far away. He answered from time to time, so as not to appear absolutely dumb, and then only a few syllables. This absence of opposition was more irritating to the comte than the most obstinate contradiction. He, therefore, directed his utmost efforts to excite his son to argue. However he was vainly prodigal of words and unsparing in unpleasant allusions, so that at last he fairly lost his temper, and, on receiving a laconic reply, he burst forth: "Upon my word, the butler's son would say the same as you! What blood have you in your veins? You are more like one of the people than a Vicomte de Commarin!"

There are certain conditions of mind in which the least conversation jars upon the nerves. During the last hour Albert had suffered an intolerable punishment. The patience with which he had armed himself at last escaped him. "Well, sir," he answered, "if I resemble one of the people, there are perhaps good reasons for it." The glance with which the vicomte accompanied his speech was so expressive that the comte experienced a sudden shock. All his animation forsook him, and in

a hesitating voice he asked: "What is that you say, vicomte?" Albert had no sooner uttered the sentence than he regretted his precipitation, but he had gone too far to stop.

"Sir," he replied with some embarrassment, "I have to acquaint you with some important matters. My honor, yours, the honor of our house, are involved. I intended postponing this conversation till to-morrow, not desiring to trouble you on the evening of your return. However, as you wish me to explain, I will do so."

The comte listened with ill-concealed anxiety. He seemed to have divined what his son was about to say, and was terrified at himself for having divined it. "Believe me, sir," continued Albert slowly, "whatever may have been your acts, my voice will never be raised to reproach you. Your constant kindness to me—" M. de Commarin held up his hand. "A truce to preambles; let me have the facts without phrases," said he sternly.

Albert was some time without answering; he hesitated how to commence. "Sir," said he at length, "during your absence I have read all your correspondence with Madame Gerdy. *All!*" added he, emphasizing the word, already so significant. The comte, as though stung by a serpent, started up with such violence that he overturned his chair. "Not another word!" cried he in a terrible voice. "I forbid you to speak!" But he no doubt soon felt ashamed of his violence, for he quietly raised his chair, and resumed in a tone which he strove to render light and rallying: "Who will hereafter refuse to believe in presentiments? A couple of hours ago, on seeing your pale face at the railway station, I felt that you had learned more or less of this affair. I was sure of it." There was a long silence. With one accord, father and son avoided letting their eyes meet, lest they might encounter glances too eloquent to bear at so painful a moment. "You were right, sir," continued the comte, "our honor is involved. It is important that we should decide on our future conduct without delay. Will you follow me to my room?" He rang the bell, and a footman appeared almost immediately. "Neither the vicomte nor I am at home to any one," said M. de Commarin, "no matter whom."

IX

THE revelation which had just taken place irritated much more than it surprised the Comte de Commarin. For twenty years he had been constantly expecting to see the truth brought to light. He knew that there can be no secret so carefully guarded that it may not by some chance escape; and his had been known to four people, three of whom were still living. He had not forgotten that he had been imprudent enough to trust it to paper, knowing all the while that it ought never to have been written. How was it that he, a prudent diplomat, a statesman, full of precaution, had been so foolish? How was it that he had allowed this fatal correspondence to remain in existence! Why had he not destroyed, at no matter what cost, these overwhelming proofs, which sooner or later might be used against him? Such imprudence could only have arisen from an absurd passion, blind and insensible, even to madness. So long as he was Valerie's lover, the comte never thought of asking the return of his letters from his beloved accomplice. If the idea had occurred to him, he would have repelled it as an insult to the character of his angel. What reason could he have had to suspect her discretion? None. He would have been much more likely to suppose her desirous of removing every trace, even the slightest, of what had taken place. Was it not her son who had received the benefits of the deed, who had usurped another's name and fortune? When eight years after, believing her to be unfaithful, the comte had put an end to the connection which had given him so much happiness he thought of obtaining possession of this unhappy correspondence. But he knew not how to do so. A thousand reasons prevented him moving in the matter. The principal one was that he did not wish to see this woman once so dearly loved. He did not feel sufficiently sure either of his anger or of his firmness. Could he, without yielding, resist the tearful pleading of those eyes which had so long held complete sway over him? To look again upon this mistress of his youth would,

he feared, result in his forgiving her; and he had been too cruelly wounded in his pride and in his affection to admit the idea of a reconciliation. On the other hand, to obtain the letters through a third party was entirely out of the question. He abstained, then, from all action, postponing it indefinitely. "I will go to her," said he to himself; "but not until I have so torn her from my heart that she will have become indifferent to me. I will not gratify her with the sight of my grief." So months and years passed on; and finally he began to say and believe that it was too late. And for now more than twenty years he had never passed a day without cursing his inexcusable folly. Never had he been able to forget that above his head a danger more terrible than the sword of Damocles hung, suspended by a thread, which the slightest accident might break. And now that thread had broken. Often, when considering the possibility of such a catastrophe, he had asked himself how he should avert it? He had formed and rejected many plans: he had deluded himself, like all men of imagination, with innumerable chimerical projects, and now he found himself quite unprepared.

Albert stood respectfully, while his father sat in his great armorial chair, just beneath the large frame in which the genealogical tree of the illustrious family of Rheteau de Commarin spread its luxuriant branches. The old gentleman completely concealed the cruel apprehensions which oppressed him. He seemed neither irritated nor dejected; but his eyes expressed a haughtiness more than usually disdainful, and a self-reliance full of contempt. "Now, vicomte," he began in a firm voice, "explain yourself. I need say nothing to you of the position of a father, obliged to blush before his son; you understand it and will feel for me. Let us spare each other and try to be calm. Tell me how did you obtain your knowledge of this correspondence?"

Albert had had time to recover himself and prepare for the present struggle, as he had impatiently waited four days for this interview. The difficulty he experienced in uttering the first words had now given place to a dignified and proud demeanor. He expressed himself clearly and forcibly, without losing himself in those details which in serious matters needlessly defer the real point at issue. "Sir," he replied, "on Sunday morning a young man called here, stating that he had business with me of the utmost importance. I received him.

He then revealed to me that I, alas! am only your natural son, substituted, through your affection, for the legitimate child borne you by Madame de Commarin."

"And did you not have this man kicked out of doors?" exclaimed the comte.

"No, sir. I was about to answer him very sharply, of course; but, presenting me with a packet of letters, he begged me to read them before replying."

"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin, "you should have thrown them into the fire, for there was a fire, I suppose? You held them in your hands, and they still exist? Why was I not there?"

"Sir!" said Albert reproachfully. And, recalling the position Noel had occupied against the mantelpiece, and the manner in which he stood, he added: "Even if the thought had occurred to me, it was impracticable. Besides, at the first glance, I recognized your handwriting. I, therefore, took the letters and read them."—"And then?"—"And then, sir, I returned the correspondence to the young man, and asked for a delay of eight days; not to think over it myself—there was no need of that—but because I judged an interview with you indispensable. Now, therefore, I beseech you, tell me whether this substitution really did take place."

"Certainly it did," replied the comte violently; "yes, certainly. You know that it did, for you have read what I wrote to Madame Gerdy, your mother." Albert had foreseen, had expected this reply; but it crushed him nevertheless. There are misfortunes so great that one must constantly think of them to believe in their existence. This flinching, however, lasted but an instant. "Pardon me, sir," he replied; "I was almost convinced, but I had not received a formal assurance of it. All the letters that I read spoke distinctly of your purpose, detailed your plan minutely; but not one pointed to, or in any way confirmed, the execution of your project."

The comte gazed at his son with a look of intense surprise. He recollected distinctly all the letters; and he could remember that, in writing to Valerie, he had over and over again rejoiced at their success, thanking her for having acted in accordance with his wishes. "You did not go to the end of them, then, vicomte," he said; "you did not read them all?"

"Every line, sir, and with an attention that you may well understand. The last letter shown me simply announced to Madame Gerdy the arrival of Claudine Lerouge, the nurse who

was charged with accomplishing the substitution. I know nothing beyond that."

"These proofs amount to nothing," muttered the comte. "A man may form a plan, cherish it for a long time, and at the last moment abandon it; it often happens so." He reproached himself for having answered so hastily. Albert had had only serious suspicions, and he had changed them to certainty. What stupidity! "There can be no possible doubt," he said to himself; "Valerie has destroyed the most conclusive letters, those which appeared to her the most dangerous, those I wrote after the substitution. But why has she preserved these others, compromising enough in themselves? and why, after having preserved them, has she let them go out of her possession?" Without moving, Albert awaited a word from the comte. What would it be? No doubt the old nobleman was at that moment deciding what he should do. "Perhaps she is dead!" said M. de Commarin aloud. And at the thought that Valerie was dead, without his having again seen her, he started painfully. His heart, after more than twenty years of voluntary separation, still suffered, so deeply rooted was this first love of his youth. He had cursed her; at this moment he pardoned her. True, she had deceived him; but did he not owe to her the only years of happiness he had ever known? Had she not formed all the poetry of his youth? Had he experienced, since leaving her, one single hour of joy or forgetfulness? In his present frame of mind, his heart retained only happy memories, like a vase which, once filled with precious perfumes, retains the odor until it is destroyed. "Poor woman!" he murmured. He sighed deeply. Three or four times his eyelids trembled, as if a tear were about to fall. Albert watched him with anxious curiosity. This was the first time since the vicomte had grown to man's estate that he had surprised in his father's countenance other emotion than ambition or pride, triumphant or defeated.

But M. de Commarin was not the man to yield long to sentiment. "You have not told me, vicomte," he said, "who sent you that messenger of misfortune."

"He came in person, sir, not wishing, he told me, to mix any others up in this sad affair. The young man was no other than he whose place I have occupied—your legitimate son, M. Noel Gerdy himself."

"Yes," said the comte in a low tone, "Noel, that is his name,

I remember." And then, with evident hesitation, he added: "Did he speak to you of his—of your mother?"

"Scarcely, sir. He only told me that he came unknown to her; that he had accidentally discovered the secret which he revealed to me."

M. de Commarin asked nothing further. There was more for him to learn. He remained for some time deep in thought. The decisive moment had come, and he saw but one way to escape. "Come, vicomte," he said in a tone so affectionate that Albert was astonished, "do not stand; sit down here by me, and let us discuss this matter. Let us unite our efforts to shun, if possible, this great misfortune. Confide in me, as a son should in his father. Have you thought of what is to be done? have you formed any determination?"

"It seems to me, sir, that hesitation is impossible."

"In what way?"

"My duty, father, is very plain. Before your legitimate son, I ought to give way without a murmur, if not without regret. Let him come. I am ready to yield to him everything that I have so long kept from him without a suspicion of the truth—his father's love, his fortune, and his name."

At this most praiseworthy reply the old nobleman could scarcely preserve the calmness he had recommended to his son in the earlier part of the interview. His face grew purple, and he struck the table with his fist more furiously than he had ever done in his life. He, usually so guarded, so decorous on all occasions, uttered a volley of oaths that would not have done discredit to an old cavalry officer. "And I tell you, sir, that this dream of yours shall never take place. No; that it shan't. I swear it. I promise you, whatever happens, understand, that things shall remain as they are; because it is my will. You are Vicomte de Commarin, and Vicomte de Commarin you shall remain, in spite of yourself, if necessary. You shall retain the title to your death, or at least to mine; for never, while I live, shall your absurd idea be carried out."

"But, sir," began Albert timidly.

"You are very daring to interrupt me while I am speaking, sir," exclaimed the comte. "Do I not know all your objections beforehand? You are going to tell me that it is a revolting injustice, a wicked robbery. I confess it, and grieve over it more than you possibly can. Do you think that I now for the first time repent of my youthful folly? For twenty years, sir,

I have lamented my true son; for twenty years I have cursed the wickedness of which he is the victim. And yet I learned how to keep silence, and to hide the sorrow and remorse which have covered my pillow with thorns. In a single instant your senseless yielding would render my long sufferings of no avail. No, I will never permit it!" The comte read a reply on his son's lips: he stopped him with a withering glance. "Do you think," he continued, "that I have never wept over the thought of my legitimate son passing his life struggling for a competence? Do you think that I have never felt a burning desire to repair the wrong done him? There have been times, sir, when I would have given half of my fortune simply to embrace that child of a wife too tardily appreciated. The fear of casting a shadow of suspicion upon your birth prevented me. I have sacrificed myself to the great name I bear. I received it from my ancestors without a stain. May you hand it down to your children equally spotless! Your first impulse was a worthy one, generous and noble; but you must forget it. Think of the scandal if our secret should be disclosed to the public gaze. Can you not foresee the joy of our enemies, of that herd of upstarts which surround us? I shudder at the thought of the odium and the ridicule which would cling to our name. Too many families already have stains upon their escutcheons; I will have none on mine." M. de Commarin remained silent for several minutes, during which Albert did not dare say a word, so much had he been accustomed since infancy to respect the least wish of the terrible old gentleman. "There is no possible way out of it," continued the comte. "Can I discard you tomorrow and present this Noel as my son, saying, 'Excuse me, but there has been a slight mistake; this one is the vicomte?' And then the tribunals will get hold of it. What does it matter who is named Benoit, Durand, or Bernard? But when one is called Commarin, even but for a single day, one must retain that name through life. The same moral does not do for every one; because we have not the same duties to perform. In our position errors are irreparable. Take courage, then, and show yourself worthy of the name you bear. The storm is upon you; raise your head to meet it." Albert's impassibility contributed not a little to increase M. de Commarin's irritation. Firm in an unchangeable resolution, the vicomte listened like one fulfilling a duty: and his face reflected no emotion. The comte saw that he was not shaken. "What have you to reply?" he asked.

"It seems to me, sir, that you have no idea of all the dangers which I foresee. It is difficult to master the revolts of conscience."

"Indeed!" interrupted the comte contemptuously; "your conscience revolts, does it? It has chosen its time badly. Your scruples come too late. So long as you saw that your inheritance consisted of an illustrious title and a dozen or so of millions, it pleased you. To-day the name appears to you laden with a heavy fault, a crime, if you will; and your conscience revolts. Renounce this folly. Children, sir, are accountable to their fathers; and they should obey them. Willing or unwilling, you must be my accomplice; willing or unwilling, you must bear the burden as I have borne it. And, however much you may suffer, be assured your sufferings can never approach what I have endured for so many years."

"Ah, sir!" cried Albert, "it is then I, the dispossessor, who has made this trouble? is it not, on the contrary, the dispossessed! It is not I whom you have to convince, it is M. Neol Gerdy."

"Noel!" repeated the comte.

"Your legitimate son, yes, sir. You act as if the issue of this unhappy affair depended solely upon my will. Do you then, imagine that M. Gerdy will be so easily disposed of, so easily silenced? And, if he should raise his voice, do you hope to move him by the considerations you have just mentioned?"

"I do not fear him."

"Then you are wrong, sir, permit me to tell you. Suppose for a moment that this young man has a soul sufficiently noble to relinquish his claim upon your rank and your fortune. Is there not the accumulated rancor of years to urge him to oppose you? He can not help feeling a fierce resentment for the horrible injustice of which he has been the victim. He must passionately long for vengeance, or rather reparation."

"He has no proofs."

"He has your letters, sir."

"They are not decisive, you yourself have told me so."

"That is true, sir; and yet they convinced me, who have an interest in not being convinced. Besides, if he needs witnesses, he will find them."

"Who? Yourself, vicomte?"

"Yourself, sir. The day when he wishes it, you will betray us. Suppose you were summoned before a tribunal, and that

there, under oath, you should be required to speak the truth, what answer would you make?" M. de Commarin's face darkened at this very natural supposition. He hesitated, he whose honor was usually so great. "I would save the name of my ancestors," he said at last. Albert shook his head doubtfully. "At the price of a lie, my father," he said. "I never will believe it. But let us suppose even that. He will then call Madame Gerdy."

"Oh, I will answer for her!" cried the comte, "her interests are the same as ours. If necessary, I will see her. Yes," he added with an effort, "I will call on her, I will speak to her; and I will guarantee that she will not betray us."

"And Claudine," continued the young man; "will she be silent, too?"

"For money, yes; and I will give her whatever she asks."

"And you would trust, father, to a paid silence, as if one could ever be sure of a purchased conscience? What is sold to you may be sold to another. A certain sum may close her mouth; a larger will open it."

"I will frighten her."

"You forget, father, that Claudine Lerouge was Noel Gerdy's nurse, that she takes an interest in his happiness, that she loves him. How do you know that he has not already secured her aid? She lives at Bougival. I went there, I remember, with you. No doubt, he sees her often; perhaps it is she who put him on the track of this correspondence. He spoke to me of her, as though he were sure of her testimony. He almost proposed my going to her for information."

"Alas!" cried the comte, "why is not Claudine dead instead of my faithful Germain?"

"You see, sir," concluded Albert, "Claudine Lerouge would alone render all your efforts useless."

"Ah, no!" cried the comte, "I shall find some expedient." The obstinate old gentleman was not willing to give in to this argument, the very clearness of which blinded him. The pride of his blood paralyzed his usual practical good sense. To acknowledge that he was conquered humiliated him, and seemed to him unworthy of himself. He did not remember to have met during his long career an invincible resistance or an absolute impediment. He was like all men of imagination, who fall in love with their projects, and who expect them to succeed on all occasions, as if wishing hard was all that was

necessary to change their dreams into realities. Albert this time broke the silence, which threatened to be prolonged. "I see, sir," he said, "that you fear, above all things, the publicity of this sad history; the possible scandal renders you desperate. But, unless we yield, the scandal will be terrible. There will be a trial which will be the talk of all Europe. The newspapers will print the facts, accompanied by heavens knows what comments of their own. Our name, however the trial results, will appear in all the papers of the world. This might be borne, if we were sure of succeeding; but we are bound to lose, my father, we shall lose. Then think of the exposure! think of the dishonor branded upon us by public opinion."

"I think," said the comte, "that you can have neither respect nor affection for me, when you speak in that way."

"It is my duty, sir, to point out to you the evils I see threatening, and which there is yet time to shun. M. Noel Gerdy is your legitimate son, recognize him, acknowledge his just pretensions, and receive him. We can make the change very quietly. It is easy to account for it, through a mistake of the nurse, Claudine Lerouge, for instance. All parties being agreeable, there can be no trouble about it. What is to prevent the new Vicomte de Commarin from quitting Paris, and disappearing for a time? He might travel about Europe for four or five years; by the end of that time, all will be forgotten, and no one will remember me."

M. de Commarin was not listening; he was deep in thought. "But instead of contesting, vicomte," he cried, "we might compromise. We may be able to purchase these letters. What does this young fellow want? A position and a fortune? I will give him both. I will make him as rich as he can wish. I will give him a million; if need be, two, three—half of all I possess. With money, you see, much money—"

"Spare him, sir; he is your son."

"Unfortunately! and I wish him to the devil! I will see him, and he will agree to what I wish. I will prove to him the bad policy of the earthen pot struggling with the iron kettle; and, if he is not a fool, he will understand. The comte rubbed his hands while speaking. He was delighted with this brilliant plan of negotiation. It could not fail to result favorably A crowd of arguments occurred to his mind in support of it. He would buy back again his lost rest. But Albert did not seem to share his father's hopes. "You

will perhaps think it unkind in me, sir," said he, sadly, "to dispel this last illusion of yours; but I must. Do not delude yourself with the idea of an amicable arrangement; the awakening will only be the more painful. I have seen M. Gerdy, my father, and he is not one, I assure you, to be intimidated. If there is an energetic will in the world, it is his. He is truly your son; and his expression, like yours, shows an iron resolution, that may be broken but never bent. I can still hear his voice trembling with resentment, while he spoke to me. I can still see the dark fire of his eyes. No, he will never accept a compromise. He will have all or nothing; and I can not say that he is wrong. If you resist, he will attack you without the slightest consideration. Strong in his rights, he will cling to you with stubborn animosity. He will drag you from court to court; he will not stop short of utter defeat or complete triumph." Accustomed to absolute obedience from his son, the old nobleman was astounded at this unexpected obstinacy. "What is your object in saying all this?" he asked.

"It is this, sir. I should utterly despise myself, if I did not spare your old age this greatest of calamities. Your name does not belong to me; I will take my own. I am your natural son; I will give up my place to your legitimate son. Permit me to withdraw with at least the honor of having freely done my duty. Do not force me to wait till I am driven out in disgrace."

"What!" cried the comte, stunned, "you will abandon me? You refuse to help me, you turn against me, you recognize the rights of this man in spite of my wishes?"

Albert bowed his head. He was much moved, but still remained firm. "My resolution is irrevocably taken," he replied. "I can never consent to dispoil your son."

"Cruel, ungrateful boy!" cried M. de Commarin. His wrath was such, that, when he found he could do nothing by abuse, he passed at once to jeering. "But no," he continued, "you are great, you are noble, you are generous; you are acting after the most approved pattern of chivalry, vicomte, I should say, my dear M. Gerdy; after the fashion of Plutarch's time! So you give up my name and my fortune, and you leave me. You will shake the dust from your shoes upon the threshold of my house, and you will go out into the world. I see only one difficulty in your way. How do you expect to live, my stoic philosopher? Have you a trade at your fingers' ends, like Jean

Jacques Rousseau's Emile? Or, worthy M. Gerdy, have you learned economy from the four thousand francs a month I allow you for waxing your mustache? Perhaps you have made money on the Bourse! Then my name must have seemed very burdensome to you to bear, since you so eagerly introduced it into such a place! Has dirt, then, so great an attraction for you that you must jump from your carriage so quickly? Say, rather, that the company of my friends embarrasses you, and that you are anxious to go where you will be among your own equals."

"I am very wretched, sir," replied Albert to this avalanche of insults, "and you would crush me!"

"You wretched? Well, whose fault is it? But let us get back to my question. How and on what will you live?"

"I am not so romantic as you are pleased to say, sir. I must confess that, as regards the future, I have counted upon your kindness. You are so rich, that five hundred thousand francs would not materially affect your fortune; and, on the interest of that sum, I could live quietly, if not happily."

"And suppose I refuse you this money?"

"I know you well enough, sir, to feel sure that you will not do so. You are too just to wish that I alone should expiate wrongs that are not of my making. Left to myself, I should at my present age have achieved a position. It is late for me to try and make one now; but I will do my best."

"Superb!" interrupted the comte; "you are really superb! One never heard of such a hero of romance. What a character! But tell me, what do you expect from all this astonishing disinterestedness?"—"Nothing, sir."

The comte shrugged his shoulders, looked sarcastically at his son, and observed: "The compensation is very slight. And you expect me to believe all this! No, sir, mankind is not in the habit of indulging in such fine actions for its pleasure alone. You must have some reason for acting so grandly; some reason which I fail to see."—"None but what I have already told you."

"Therefore it is understood you intend to relinquish everything; you will even abandon your proposed union with Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange? You forget that for two years I have in vain constantly expressed my disappointment of this marriage."

"No, sir. I have seen Mademoiselle Claire; I have explained

my unhappy position to her. Whatever happens, she has sworn to be my wife."

"And do you think that Madame d'Arlange will give her granddaughter to M. Gerdy?"

"We hope so, sir. The marquise is sufficiently infected with aristocratic ideas to prefer a nobleman's bastard to the son of some honest tradesman; but should she refuse, we would await her death, though without desiring it." The calm manner in which Albert said this enraged the comte. "Can this be my son?" he cried. "Never! What blood have you then in your veins, sir? Your worthy mother alone might tell us, provided, however, she herself knows."

"Sir," cried Albert menacingly, "think well before you speak! She is my mother, and that is sufficient. I am her son, not her judge. No one shall insult her in my presence. I will not permit it, sir; and I will suffer it least of all from you."

The comte made great efforts to keep his anger within bounds; but Albert's behavior thoroughly enraged him. What, his son rebelled, he dared to brave him to his face, he threatened him! The old fellow jumped from his chair, and moved toward the young man as if he would strike him. "Leave the room," he cried, in a voice choking with rage, "leave the room instantly! Retire to your apartments, and take care not to leave them without my orders. To-morrow I will let you know my decision." Albert bowed respectfully, but without lowering his eyes, and walked slowly to the door. He had already opened it, when M. de Commarin experienced one of those revulsions of feeling so frequent in violent natures. "Albert," said he, "come here and listen to me." The young man turned back, much affected by this change. "Do not go," continued the comte, "until I have told you what I think. You are worthy of being the heir of a great house, sir. I may be angry with you; but I can never lose my esteem for you. You are a noble man, Albert. Give me your hand."

It was a happy moment for these two men, and such a one as they had scarcely ever experienced in their lives, restrained as they had been by cold etiquette. The comte felt proud of his son, and recognized in him himself at that age. For a long time their hands remained clasped, without either being able to utter a word. At last, M. de Commarin resumed his seat. "I must ask you to leave me, Albert," he said kindly. "I must be alone to reflect, to try and accustom myself to this terrible

blow." And, as the young man closed the door, he added, as if giving vent to his inmost thoughts: "If he, in whom I have placed all my hope, deserts me, what will become of me? And what will the other one be like?"

On leaving M. de Commarin, and while slowly mounting the stairs which led to his apartments, Albert's thoughts reverted to Claire. What was she doing at that moment? Thinking of him no doubt. She knew that the crisis would come that very evening, or the next day at the latest. She was probably praying. Albert was thoroughly exhausted; his head felt dizzy, and seemed ready to burst. He rang for his servant, and ordered some tea. "You do wrong in not sending for the doctor, sir," said Lubin, his valet. "I ought to disobey you, and send for him myself."—"It would be useless," replied Albert sadly; "he could do nothing for me." As the valet was leaving the room, he added: "Say nothing about my being unwell to any one, Lubin; it is nothing at all. If I should feel worse, I will ring."

At that moment, to see any one, to hear a voice, to have to reply, was more than he could bear. He longed to be left entirely to himself. After the painful emotions arising from his explanations with the comte, he could not sleep. He opened one of the library windows, and looked out. It was a beautiful night: and there was a lovely moon. Seen at this hour, by the mild, tremulous evening light, the gardens attached to the mansion seemed twice their usual size. The moving tops of the great trees stretched away like an immense plain, hiding the neighboring houses; the flower-beds, set off by the green shrubs, looked like great black patches, while particles of shell, tiny pieces of glass, and shining pebbles sparkled in the carefully kept walks. The horses stamped in the stable: and the rattling of their halter chains against the bars of the manger could be distinctly heard. In the coach-house the men were putting away for the night the carriage, always kept ready throughout the evening, in case the comte should wish to go out. Albert was reminded by these surroundings of the magnificence of his past life. He sighed deeply. "Must I, then, lose all this?" he murmured. "I can scarcely, even for myself, abandon so much splendor without regret; and thinking of Claire makes it hard indeed. Have I not dreamed of a life of exceptional happiness for her, a result almost impossible to realize without wealth?" Midnight sounded from the neighboring church of

St. Clotilde, and as the night was chilly, he closed the window, and sat down near the fire, which he stirred. In the hope of obtaining a respite from his thoughts, he took up the evening paper, in which was an account of the assassination at La Jonchere; but he found it impossible to read: the lines danced before his eyes. Then he thought of writing to Claire. He sat down at his desk, and wrote: "My dearly loved Claire," but he could go no further; his distracted brain could not furnish him with a single sentence. At last, at break of day, he threw himself on to a sofa, and fell into a heavy sleep.

At half-past nine in the morning, he was suddenly awakened by the noise of the door being hastily opened. A servant entered, with a scared look on his face, and so out of breath from having come up the stairs four at a time that he could scarcely speak. "Sir," said he, "vicomte, be quick, fly and hide, save yourself, they are here, it is the—"

A commissary of police, wearing his sash, appeared at the door. He was followed by a number of men, among whom M. Tabaret could be seen, keeping as much out of sight as possible. The commissary approached Albert. "You are," he asked, "Guy Louis Marie Albert de Rheteau de Commarin?"—"Yes, sir."—The commissary placed his hand upon him while pronouncing the usual formula: "M. de Commarin, in the name of the law, I arrest you."

"Me, sir? me?" Albert, aroused suddenly from his painful dreams, seemed hardly to comprehend what was taking place. He seemed to ask himself: "Am I really awake? Is not this some hideous nightmare?" He threw a stupid, astonished look upon the commissary of police, his men, and M. Tabaret, who had not taken his eyes off him.

"Here is the warrant," added the commissary, unfolding the paper. Mechanically Albert glanced over it. "Claudine assassinated!" he cried. Then very low, but distinct enough to be heard by the commissary, by one of his officers, and by old Tabaret, he added: "I am lost!"

While the commissary was making inquiries, which immediately follow all arrests, the police officers spread through the apartments, and proceeded to a searching examination of them. They had received orders to obey M. Tabaret, and the old fellow guided them in their search, made them ransack drawers and closets, and move the furniture to look underneath or behind. They seized a number of articles belonging to the vicomte

—documents, manuscripts, and a very voluminous correspondence; but it was with especial delight that M. Tabaret put his hands on certain articles, which were carefully described in their proper order in the official report: 1. In the anteroom, hung with all sorts of weapons, a broken foil was found behind a sofa. This foil has a peculiar handle, and is unlike those commonly sold. It is ornamented with the comte's coronet, and the initials A. C. It has been broken at about the middle; and the end can not be found. When questioned, the vicomte declared that he did not know what had become of the missing end. 2. In the dressing-room, a pair of black cloth trousers was discovered, still damp, and bearing stains of mud or rather of mold. All one side is smeared with greenish moss, like that which grows on walls. On the front are numerous rents; and one near the knee is about four inches long. These trousers had not been hung up with the other clothes; but appear to have been hidden between two large trunks full of clothing. 3. In the pocket of the above-mentioned trousers was found a pair of lavender kid gloves. The palm of the right-hand glove bears a large greenish stain, produced by grass or moss. The tips of the fingers have been worn as if by rubbing. Upon the backs of both gloves are some scratches, apparently made by finger-nails. 4. There were also found in the dressing-room two pairs of boots, one of which, though clean and polished, was still very damp; and an umbrella recently wetted, the end of which was still covered with a light colored mud. 5. In a large room, called the library, were found a box of cigars of the trabucos brand, and on the mantelshelf a number of cigar-holders in amber and meerschaum.

The last article noted down, M. Tabaret approached the commissary of police. "I have everything I could desire," he whispered.—"And I have finished," replied the commissary. "Our prisoner does not appear to know exactly how to act. You heard what he said. He gave in at once. I suppose you will call it lack of experience."

"In the middle of the day," replied the amateur detective in a whisper, "he would not have been quite so crestfallen. But early in the morning, suddenly awakened, you know— Always arrest a person early in the morning, when he's hungry and only half awake."

"I have questioned some of the servants. Their evidence is rather peculiar."

"Very well; we shall see. But I must hurry off and find the investigating magistrate, who is impatiently expecting me."

Albert was beginning to recover a little from the stupor into which he had been plunged by the entrance of the commissary of police. "Sir," he asked, "will you permit me to say a few words in your presence to the Comte de Commarin? I am the victim of some mistake, which will be very soon discovered—"

"It's always a mistake," muttered old Tabaret.

"What you ask is impossible," replied the commissary. "I have special orders of the strictest sort. You must not henceforth communicate with a living soul. A cab is in waiting below. Have the goodness to accompany me to it."

In crossing the vestibule, Albert noticed a great stir among the servants; they all seemed to have lost their senses. M. Denis gave some orders in a sharp, imperative tone. Then he thought he heard that the Comte de Commarin had been struck down with apoplexy. After that, he remembered nothing. They almost carried him to the cab, which drove off as fast as the two little horses could go. M. Tabaret had just hastened away in a more rapid vehicle.

X

M. DABURON had arrived at his office in the Palais de Justice at nine o'clock in the morning, and was waiting. His course resolved upon, he had not lost an instant, understanding as well as old Tabaret the necessity for rapid action. He had already had an interview with the public prosecutor, and had arranged everything with the police. Besides issuing the warrant against Albert, he had summoned the Comte de Commarin, Madame Gerdy, Noel, and some of Albert's servants to appear before him with as little delay as possible. He thought it essential to question all these persons before examining the prisoner. Several detectives had started off to execute his orders, and he himself sat in his office, like a general commanding an army, who sends off his aide-de-camp to begin the battle, and who hopes that victory will crown his com-

binations. Often, at this same hour, he had sat in this office, under circumstances almost identical. A crime had been committed, and, believing he had discovered the criminal, he had given orders for his arrest. Was not that his duty? But he had never before experienced the anxiety of mind which disturbed him now. Many a time had he issued warrants of arrest, without possessing even half the proofs which guided him in the present case. He kept repeating this to himself; and yet he could not quiet his dreadful anxiety, which would not allow him a moment's rest.

He wondered why his people were so long in making their appearance. He walked up and down the room, counting the minutes, drawing out his watch three times within a quarter of an hour, to compare it with the clock. Every time he heard a step in the passage, almost deserted at that hour, he moved near the door, stopped and listened. At length some one knocked. It was his clerk, whom he had sent for. There was nothing particular in this man; he was tall rather than big, and very slim. His gait was precise, his gestures were methodical, and his face was as impassive as if it had been cut out of a piece of yellow wood. He was thirty-four years of age, and during thirteen years had acted as clerk to four investigating magistrates in succession. He could hear the most astonishing things without moving a muscle. His name was Constant. He bowed to the magistrate, and excused himself for his tardiness. He had been busy with some bookkeeping, which he did every morning; and his wife had had to send after him. "You are still in good time," said M. Daburon: "but we shall soon have plenty of work: so you had better get your paper ready." Five minutes later, the usher introduced M. Noel Gerdy. He entered with an easy manner, like a barrister who was well acquainted with the Palais, and who knew its winding ways. He in no wise resembled, this morning, old Tabaret's friend; still less could he have been recognized as Madame Juliette's lover. He was entirely another being, or rather he had resumed his every-day bearing. From his firm step, his placid face, one would never imagine that, after an evening of emotion and excitement, after a secret visit to his mistress, he had passed the night by the pillow of a dying woman, and that woman his mother, or at least one who had filled his mother's place. What a contrast between him and the magistrate! M. Daburon had not slept either: but one could easily see that in

his feebleness, in his anxious look, in the dark circles about his eyes. His shirt-front was all rumpled, and his cuffs were far from clean. Carried away by the course of events, the mind had forgotten the body. Noel's well-shaved chin, on the contrary, rested upon an irreproachably white cravat; his collar did not show a crease; his hair and his whiskers had been most carefully brushed. He bowed to M. Daburon, and held out the summons he had received. "You summoned me, sir," he said; "and I am here awaiting your orders."

The investigating magistrate had met the young barrister several times in the lobbies of the Palais; and he knew him well by sight. He remembered having heard M. Gerdy spoken of as a man of talent and promise, whose reputation was fast rising. He therefore welcomed him as a fellow workman, and invited him to be seated. The preliminaries common in the examinations of all witnesses ended; the name, surname, age, place of business, and so on, having been written down, the magistrate, who had followed his clerk with his eyes while he was writing, turned toward Noel. "I presume you know, M. Gerdy," he began, "the matters in connection with which you are troubled with appearing before me?"

"Yes, sir, the murder of that poor old woman at La Jonchere."

"Precisely," replied M. Daburon. Then, calling to mind his promise to old Tabaret, he added: "If justice has summoned you so promptly, it is because we have found your name often mentioned in Widow Lerouge's papers."

"I am not surprised at that," replied the barrister: "we were greatly interested in that poor woman, who was my nurse; and I know that Madame Gerdy wrote to her frequently."

"Very well; then you will give me some information about her."

"I fear, sir, that it will be very incomplete. I knew very little about this poor old Madame Lerouge. I was taken from her at a very early age; and, since I have been a man, I have thought but little about her, except to send her occasionally a little aid."

"You never went to visit her?"

"Excuse me. I have gone there to see her many times; but I remained only a few minutes. Madame Gerdy, who has often seen her, and to whom she talked of all her affairs, could have enlightened you much better than I."

"But," said the magistrate, "I expect shortly to see Madame Gerdy here; she, too, must have received a summons."

"I know it, sir, but it is impossible for her to appear: she is ill in bed."—"Seriously?"—"So seriously that you will be obliged, I think, to give up all hope of her testimony. She is attacked with a disease which, in the words of my friend, Dr. Herve, never forgives. It is something like inflammation of the brain, if I am not mistaken. It may be that her life will be saved, but she will never recover her reason. If she does not die, she will be insane." M. Daburon appeared greatly vexed. "This is very annoying," he muttered. "And you think, my dear sir, that it will be impossible to obtain any information from her?"

"It is useless even to hope for it. She has completely lost her reason. She was, when I left her, in such a state of utter prostration that I fear she can not live through the day."—"And when was she attacked by this illness?"—"Yesterday evening."—"Suddenly?"—"Yes, sir; at least, apparently so, though I myself think she has been unwell for the last three weeks at least. Yesterday, however, on rising from dinner, after having eaten but little, she took up a newspaper; and, by a most unfortunate hazard, her eyes fell exactly upon the lines which gave an account of this crime. She at once uttered a loud cry, fell back in her chair, and thence slipped to the floor, murmuring: 'Oh, the unhappy man, the unhappy man!'"

"The unhappy woman, you mean."

"No, sir. She uttered the words I have just repeated. Evidently the exclamation did not refer to my poor nurse."

Upon this reply, so important and yet made in the most unconscious tone, M. Daburon raised his eyes to the witness. The barrister lowered his head. "And then?" asked the magistrate, after a moment's silence, during which he had taken a few notes.

"Those words, sir, were the last spoken by Madame Gerdy. Assisted by our servant, I carried her to her bed. The doctor was sent for; and since then she has not recovered consciousness. The doctor—"

"It is well," interrupted M. Daburon. "Let us leave that for the present. Do you know, sir, whether Widow Lerouge had any enemies?"—"None that I know of, sir."—"She had no enemies? Well, now tell me, does there exist to your knowledge any one having the least interest in the death of this poor

woman?" As he asked this question the investigating magistrate kept his eyes fixed on Noel's, not wishing him to turn or lower his head. The barrister started, and seemed deeply moved. He was disconcerted; he hesitated, as if a struggle was going on within him. Finally, in a voice which was by no means firm, he replied: "No, no one."

"Is that really true?" asked the magistrate, looking at him more searchingly. "You know no one whom this crime benefits, or whom it might benefit—absolutely no one?"

"I know only one thing, sir," replied Noel; "and that is, that, as far as I am concerned, it has caused me an irreparable injury."

"At last," thought M. Daburon, "we have got at the letters; and I have not betrayed poor old Tabaret. It would be too bad to cause the least trouble to that zealous and invaluable man." He then added aloud: "An injury to you, my dear sir? You will, I hope, explain yourself."

Noel's embarrassment, of which he had already given some signs, reappeared much more marked. "I am aware, sir," he replied, "that I owe justice not merely the truth, but the whole truth; but there are circumstances involved so delicate that the conscience of a man of honor sees danger in them. Besides, it is very hard to be obliged to unveil such sad secrets, the revelation of which may sometimes—" M. Daburon interrupted with a gesture. Noel's sad tone impressed him. Knowing, beforehand, what he was about to hear, he felt for the young barrister. He turned to his clerk. "Constant!" said he in a peculiar tone. This was evidently a signal; for the tall clerk rose methodically, put his pen behind his ear, and went out in his measured tread.

Noel appeared sensible of this kindness. His face expressed the strongest gratitude; his look returned thanks. "I am very much obliged to you, sir," he said with suppressed warmth, "for your considerateness. What I have to say is very painful; but it will be scarcely an effort to speak before you now."

"Fear nothing," replied the magistrate; "I will only retain of your deposition, my dear sir, what seems to me absolutely indispensable."

"I feel scarcely master of myself, sir," began Noel; "so pray pardon my emotion. If any words escape me that seem charged with bitterness, excuse them; they will be involuntary. Up to the past few days, I always believed that I was the offspring of

illicit love. My history is short. I have been honorably ambitious; I have worked hard. He who has no name must make one, you know. I have passed a quiet life, retired and austere, as people must, who, starting at the foot of the ladder, wish to reach the top. I worshiped her whom I believed to be my mother; and I felt convinced that she loved me in return. The stain of my birth had some humiliations attached to it; but I despised them. Comparing my lot with that of so many others, I felt that I had more than common advantages. One day, Providence placed in my hands all the letters which my father, the Comte de Commarin, had written to Madame Gerdy during the time she was his mistress. On reading these letters, I was convinced that I was not what I had hitherto believed myself to be—that Madame Gerdy was not my mother!" And, without giving M. Daburon time to reply, he laid before him the facts which, twelve hours before, he had related to M. Tabaret. It was the same story, with the same circumstances, the same abundance of precise and conclusive details; but the tone in which it was told was entirely changed. When speaking to the old detective, the young barrister had been emphatic and violent; but now, in the presence of the investigating magistrate, he restrained his vehement emotions. One might imagine that he adapted his style to his auditors, wishing to produce the same effect on both, and using the method which would best accomplish his purpose. To an ordinary mind like M. Tabaret's he used the exaggeration of anger; but to a man of superior intelligence like M. Daburon, he employed the exaggeration of restraint. With the detective he had rebelled against his unjust lot; but with the magistrate he seemed to bow, full of resignation, before a blind fatality. With genuine eloquence and rare facility of expression, he related his feelings on the day following the discovery—his grief, his perplexity, his doubts. To support this moral certainty, some positive testimony was needed. Could he hope for this from the comte or from Madame Gerdy, both interested in concealing the truth? No. But he had counted upon that of his nurse—the poor old woman who loved him, and who, near the close of her life, would be glad to free her conscience from this heavy load. She was dead now; and the letters became mere waste paper in his hands. Then he passed on to his explanation with Madame Gerdy, and he gave the magistrate even fuller details than he had given his old neighbor. She had, he said, at first utterly

denied the substitution, but he insinuated that, plied with questions, and overcome by the evidence, she had, in a moment of despair, confessed all, declaring, soon after, that she would retract and deny this confession, being resolved at all hazards that her son should preserve his position. From this scene, in the barrister's judgment, might be dated the first attacks of the illness to which she was now succumbing. Noel then described his interview with the Vicomte de Commarin. A few inaccuracies occurred in his narrative, but so slight that it would have been difficult to charge him with them. Besides, there was nothing in them at all unfavorable to Albert. He insisted, on the contrary, upon the excellent impression which that young man had made on him. Albert had received the revelation with a certain distrust, it is true, but with a noble firmness at the same time, and, like a brave heart, was ready to bow before the justification of right. In fact, he drew an almost enthusiastic portrait of this rival, who had not been spoiled by prosperity, who had left him without a look of hatred, toward whom he felt himself drawn, and who after all was his brother.

M. Daburon listened to Noel with a most unremitting attention, without allowing a word, a movement, or a frown, to betray his feelings. "How, sir," observed the magistrate when the young man ceased speaking, "could you have told me that, in your opinion, no one was interested in Widow Lerouge's death?" The barrister made no reply. "It seems to me," continued M. Daburon, "that the Vicomte de Commarin's position has thereby become almost impregnable. Madame Gerdy is insane; the comte will deny all; your letters prove nothing. It is evident that the crime is of the greatest service to this young man, and that it was committed at a singularly favorable moment."

"Oh, sir!" cried Noel, protesting with all his energy, "this insinuation is dreadful." The magistrate watched the barrister's face narrowly. Was he speaking frankly, or was he but playing at being generous? Could it really be that he had never had any suspicion of this? Noel did not flinch under the gaze, but almost immediately continued: "What reason could this young man have for trembling, or fearing for his position? I did not utter one threatening word, even indirectly. I did not present myself like a man who, furious at being robbed, demands that everything which had been taken from him should be restored on the spot. I merely presented the

facts to Albert, saying: 'Here is the truth; what do you think we ought to do? Be judge.'"

"And he asked you for time?"

"Yes. I had suggested his accompanying me to see Widow Lerouge, whose testimony might dispel all doubts; he did not seem to understand me. But he was well acquainted with her, having visited her with the comte, who supplied her, I have since learned, liberally with money."

"Did not this generosity appear to you very singular?"—"No."—"Can you explain why the vicomte did not appear disposed to accompany you?"—"Certainly. He had just said that he wished, before all, to have an explanation with his father, who was then absent, but who would return in a few days."

The truth, as all the world knows, and delights in proclaiming, has an accent which no one can mistake. M. Daburon had not the slightest doubt of his witness's good faith. Noel continued with the ingenuous candor of an honest heart which suspicion has never touched with its bat's wing: "The idea of treating at once with my father pleased me exceedingly. I thought it so much better to wash all one's dirty linen at home, I had never desired anything but an amicable arrangement. With my hands full of proofs, I should still recoil from a public trial."

"Would you not have brought an action?"

"Never, sir, not at any price. Could I," he added proudly, "to regain my rightful name begin by dishonoring it?" This time M. Daburon could not conceal his sincere admiration. "A most praiseworthy feeling, sir," he said.

"I think," replied Noel, "that it is but natural. If things came to the worst, I had determined to leave my title with Albert. No doubt the name of Commarin is an illustrious one, but I hope that, in ten years' time, mine will be more known. I would, however, have demanded a large pecuniary compensation. I possess nothing; and I have often been hampered in my career by the want of money. That which Madame Gerdy owed to the generosity of my father was almost entirely spent. My education had absorbed a great part of it; and it was long before my profession covered my expenses. Madame Gerdy and I live very quietly; but, unfortunately, though simple in her tastes, she lacks economy and system; and no one can imagine how great our expenses have been. But I have nothing to reproach myself with, whatever happens.

At the commencement I could not keep my anger well under control; but now I bear no ill-will. On learning of the death of my nurse, though, I cast all my hopes into the sea."

"You were wrong, my dear sir," said the magistrate. "I advise you to still hope. Perhaps, before the end of the day, you will enter into possession of your rights. Justice, I will not conceal from you, thinks she has found Widow Lerouge's assassin. At this moment Vicomte Albert is doubtless under arrest."

"What!" exclaimed Noel, with a sort of stupor: "I was not, then, mistaken, sir, in the meaning of your words. I dreaded to understand them."

"You have not mistaken me, sir," said M. Daburon. "I thank you for your sincere straightforward explanations; they have eased my task materially. To-morrow—for to-day my time is all taken up—we will write down your deposition together if you like. I have nothing more to say, I believe, except to ask you for the letters in your possession, and which are indispensable to me."

"Within an hour, sir, you shall have them," replied Noel. And he retired after having warmly expressed his gratitude to the investigating magistrate.

Had he been less preoccupied, the barrister might have perceived at the end of the gallery old Tabaret, who had just arrived, eager and happy, like a bearer of great news as he was. His cab had scarcely stopped at the gate of the Palais de Justice before he was in the courtyard and rushing toward the porch. To see him jumping more nimbly than a fifth-rate lawyer's clerk up the steep flight of stairs leading to the magistrate's office, one would never have believed that he was many years on the shady side of fifty. Even he himself had forgotten it. He did not remember how he had passed the night; he had never before felt so fresh, so agile, in such spirits; he seemed to have springs of steel in his limbs. He burst like a cannon-shot into the magistrate's office, knocking up against the methodical clerk in the rudest of ways, without even asking his pardon. "Caught!" he cried while yet on the threshold, "caught, nipped, squeezed, strung, trapped, locked! We have got the man." Old Tabaret, more Tirauclair than ever, gesticulated with such comical vehemence and such remarkable contortions that even the tall clerk smiled, for which, however, he took himself severely to task on going to bed that night.

But M. Daburon, still under the influence of Noel's deposition, was shocked at this apparently unreasonable joy; although he felt the safer for it. He looked severely at old Tabaret, saying: "Hush, sir; be decent, compose yourself." At any other time the old fellow would have felt ashamed at having deserved such a reprimand. Now it made no impression on him. "I can't be quiet," he replied. "Never has anything like this been known before. All that I mentioned has been found. Broken foil, lavender kid gloves slightly frayed, cigar-holder; nothing is wanting. You shall have them, sir, and many other things besides. I have a little system of my own, which appears by no means a bad one. Just see the triumph of my method of induction, which Gevrol ridiculed so much. I'd give a hundred francs if he were only here now. But no; my Gevrol wants to nab the man with the earrings; he is just capable of doing that. He is a fine fellow, this Gevrol, a famous fellow! How much do you give him a year for his skill?"

"Come, my dear M. Tabaret," said the magistrate as soon as he could get in a word, "be serious, if you can, and let us proceed in order."

"Pooh!" replied the old fellow, "what good will that do? It is a clear case now. When they bring the fellow before you, merely show him the particles of kid taken from behind the nails of the victim, side by side with his torn gloves, and you will overwhelm him. I wager that he will confess all, *hic et nunc*—yes, I wager my head against his; although that's pretty risky; for he may get off yet! Those milk-sops on the jury are just capable of according him extenuating circumstances. Ah! all those delays are fatal to justice! Why, if all the world were of my mind, the punishment of rascals wouldn't take such a time! They should be hanged as soon as caught. That's my opinion." M. Daburon resigned himself to this shower of words. As soon as the old fellow's excitement had cooled down a little, he began questioning him. He even then had great trouble in obtaining the exact details of the arrest; details which later on were confirmed by the commissary's official report. The magistrate appeared very surprised when he heard that Albert had exclaimed, "I am lost!" at sight of the warrant. "That," muttered he, "is a terrible proof against him."

"I should think so," replied old Tabaret. "In his ordinary state he would never have allowed himself to utter such words, for they in fact destroy him. We arrested him when he was

scarcely awake. He hadn't been in bed, but was lying in a troubled sleep, upon a sofa, when we arrived. I took good care to let a frightened servant run in in advance, and to follow closely upon him myself, to see the effect. All my arrangements were made. But, never fear, he will find a plausible excuse for this fatal exclamation. By the way, I should add that we found on the floor, near by, a crumpled copy of last evening's 'Gazette de France,' which contained an account of the assassination. This is the first time that a piece of news in the papers ever helped to nab a criminal."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate, deep in thought, "yes, you are a valuable man, M. Tabaret." Then, louder, he added: "I am thoroughly convinced, for M. Gerdy has just this moment left me."

"You have seen Noel!" cried the old fellow. On the instant all his proud self-satisfaction disappeared. A cloud of anxiety spread itself like a veil over his beaming countenance. "Noel here," he repeated. Then he timidly added: "And does he know?"—"Nothing," replied M. Daburon. "I had no need of mentioning your name. Besides, had I not promised absolute secrecy?"

"Ah, that's all right," cried old Tabaret. "And what do you think, sir, of Noel?"

"He is, I am sure, a noble, worthy heart," said the magistrate; "a nature both strong and tender. The sentiments which I heard him express here, and the genuineness of which it is impossible to doubt, manifested an elevation of soul, unhappily, very rare. Seldom in my life have I met with a man who so won my sympathy from the first. I can well understand one's pride in being among his friends."

"Just what I said; he has precisely the same effect upon every one. I love him as though he were my own child; and, whatever happens, he will inherit almost the whole of my fortune: yes, I intend leaving him everything. My will is made, and is in the hands of M. Baron, my notary. There is a small legacy, too, for Madame Gerdy; but I am going to have the paragraph that relates to that taken out at once."

"Madame Gerdy, M. Tabaret, will soon be beyond all need of worldly goods."—"How, what do you mean? Has the comte—"

"She is dying, and is not likely to live through the day; M. Gerdy told me so himself."

"Ah! heavens!" cried the old fellow, "what is that you say? Dying? Noel will be distracted; but no; since she is not his mother, how can it affect him? Dying! I thought so much of her before this discovery. Poor humanity! It seems as though all the accomplices are passing away at the same time; for I forgot to tell you, that, just as I was leaving the Commarin mansion, I heard a servant tell another that the comte had fallen down in a fit on learning the news of his son's arrest."

"That will be a great misfortune for M. Gerdy."—"For Noel?"—"I had counted upon M. de Commarin's testimony to recover for him all that he so well deserves. The comte dead, Widow Lerouge dead, Madame Gerdy dying, or in any event insane, who then can tell us whether the substitution alluded to in the letters was ever carried into execution?"

"True," murmured old Tabaret; "it is true! And I did not think of it. What fatality! For I am not deceived; I am certain that—" He did not finish. The door of M. Daburon's office opened, and the Comte de Commarin himself appeared on the threshold, as rigid as one of those old portraits which look as though they were frozen in their gilded frames. The nobleman motioned with his hand, and the two servants who had helped him up as far as the door, retired.

XI

IT was indeed the Comte de Commarin, though more like his shadow. His head, usually carried so high, leaned upon his chest; his figure was bent; his eyes had no longer their accustomed fire; his hands trembled. The extreme disorder of his dress rendered more striking still the change which had come over him. In one night he had grown twenty years older. This man, yesterday so proud of never having bent to a storm, was now completely shattered. The pride of his name had constituted his entire strength; that humbled, he seemed utterly overwhelmed. Everything in him gave way at once; all his supports failed him at the same time. His cold, lifeless gaze revealed the dull stupor of his thoughts. He presented such

a picture of utter despair that the investigating magistrate slightly shuddered at the sight. M. Tabaret looked frightened, and even the clerk seemed moved.

"Constant," said M. Daburon quickly, "go with M. Tabaret, and see if there's any news at the Prefecture."

The clerk left the room, followed by the detective, who went away regretfully. The comte had not noticed their presence; he paid no attention to their departure. M. Daburon offered him a seat, which he accepted with a sad smile. "I feel so weak," said he; "you must excuse my sitting."

Apologies to an investigating magistrate! What an advance in civilization, when the nobles consider themselves subject to the law, and bow to its decrees! Every one respects justice nowadays, and fears it a little, even when only represented by a simple and conscientious investigating magistrate.

"You are, perhaps, too unwell, comte," said the magistrate, "to give me the explanations I had hoped for."

"I am better, thank you," replied M. de Commarin; "I am as well as could be expected after the shock I have received. When I heard of the crime of which my son is accused, and of his arrest, I was thunderstruck. I believed myself a strong man; but I rolled in the dust. My servants thought me dead. Why was it not so? The strength of my constitution, my physician tells me, was all that saved me; but I believe that heaven wishes me to live, that I may drink to the bitter dregs my cup of humiliation." He stopped suddenly, nearly choked by a flow of blood that rose to his mouth. The investigating magistrate remained standing near the table, almost afraid to move. After a few moments' rest, the comte found relief, and continued: "Unhappy man that I am! ought I not to have expected it? Everything comes to light sooner or later. I am punished for my great sin—pride. I thought myself out of reach of the thunderbolt; and I have been the means of drawing down the storm upon my house. Albert an assassin! A Vicomte de Commarin arraigned before a court of assize! Ah, sir, punish me also, for I alone and long ago laid the foundation of this crime. Fifteen centuries of spotless fame end with me in infamy."

M. Daburon considered Comte de Commarin's conduct unpardonable, and had determined not to spare him. He had expected to meet a proud, haughty noble, almost unmanageable; and he had resolved to humble his arrogance. Perhaps the

harsh treatment he had received of old from the Marquise d'Arlange had given him, unconsciously, a slight grudge against the aristocracy. He had vaguely thought of certain rather severe remarks, which were to overcome the old nobleman, and bring him to a sense of his position. But when he found himself in the presence of such a sincere repentance, his indignation changed to profound pity; and he began to wonder how he could assuage the comte's grief.

"Write, sir," continued M. de Commarin with an exaltation of which he did not seem capable ten minutes before—"write my avowal and suppress nothing. I have no longer need of mercy nor of tenderness. What have I to fear now? Is not my disgrace public? Must not I, Comte Rheteau de Commarin, appear before the tribunal, to proclaim the infamy of our house? Ah! all is lost now, even honor itself. Write, sir; for I wish that all the world shall know that I am the most deserving of blame. But they shall also know that the punishment has been already terrible, and that there was no need for this last and awful trial." The comte stopped for a moment, to concentrate and arrange his memory. He soon continued in a firmer voice, and adapting his tone to what he had to say: "When I was of Albert's age, sir, my parents made me marry, in spite of my protestations, the noblest and purest of young girls. I made her the most unhappy of women. I could not love her. I cherished a most passionate love for a mistress, who had trusted herself to me, and whom I had loved for a long time. I found her rich in beauty, purity, and mind. Her name was Valerie. My heart is, so to say, dead and cold in me, sir; but, ah! when I pronounce that name it still has a great effect upon me. In spite of my marriage, I could not induce myself to part from her, though she wished me to. The idea of sharing my love with another was revolting to her. No doubt she loved me then. Our relations continued. My wife and my mistress became mothers at nearly the same time. This coincidence suggested to me the fatal idea of sacrificing my legitimate son to his less fortunate brother. I communicated this project to Valerie. To my great surprise, she refused it with horror. Already the maternal instinct was aroused within her; she would not be separated from her child. I have preserved, as a monument of my folly, the letters which she wrote to me at that time. I reread them only last night. Ah! why did I not listen to both her arguments and her prayers? It was

because I was mad. She had a sort of presentiment of the evil which overwhelms me to-day. But I came to Paris; I had absolute control over her. I threatened to leave her, never to see her again. She yielded; and my valet and Claudine Lerouge were charged with this wicked substitution. It is, therefore, the son of my mistress who bears the title of Vicomte de Commarin, and who was arrested but a short time ago."

M. Daburon had not hoped for a declaration so clear, and above all so prompt. He secretly rejoiced for the young barrister, whose noble sentiments had quite captivated him. "So, comte," said he, "you acknowledge that M. Noel Gerdy is the issue of your legitimate marriage, and that he alone is entitled to bear your name?"

"Yes, sir. Alas! I was then more delighted at the success of my project than I should have been over the most brilliant victory. I was so intoxicated with the joy of having my Valerie's child there, near me, that I forgot everything else. I had transferred to him a part of my love for his mother; or, rather, I loved him still more, if that be possible. The thought that he would bear my name, that he would inherit all my wealth, to the detriment of the other, transported me with delight. The other I hated; I could not even look upon him. I do not recollect having kissed him twice. On this point Valerie, who was very good, reproached me severely. One thing alone interfered with my happiness. The Comtesse de Commarin adored him whom she believed to be her son, and always wished to have him on her knees. I can not express what I suffered at seeing my wife cover with kisses and caresses the child of my mistress. But I kept him from her as much as I could; and she, poor woman! not understanding what was passing within me, imagined that I was doing everything to prevent her son loving her. She died, sir, with this idea, which poisoned her last days. She died of sorrow; but saint-like, without a complaint, without a murmur, pardon upon her lips and in her heart."

Though greatly pressed for time, M. Daburon did not venture to interrupt the comte, to ask him briefly for the immediate facts of the case. He knew that fever alone gave him this unnatural energy, to which at any moment might succeed the most complete prostration. He feared, if he stopped him for an instant, that he would not have strength enough to resume.

"I did not shed a single tear," continued the comte. "What

had she been in my life? A cause of sorrow and remorse. But God's justice, in advance of man's, was about to take a terrible revenge. One day I was warned that Valerie was deceiving me, and had done so for a long time. I could not believe it at first; it seemed to me impossible, absurd. I would have sooner doubted myself than her. I had taken her from a garret, where she was working sixteen hours a day to earn a few sous; she owed all to me. I had made her so much a part of myself that I could not credit her being false. I could not induce myself to feel jealous. However, I inquired into the matter; I had her watched; I even acted the spy upon her myself. I had been told the truth. This unhappy woman had another lover, and had had him for more than ten years. He was a cavalry officer. In coming to her house he took every precaution. He usually left about midnight; but sometimes he came to pass the night, and in that case went away in the early morning. Being stationed near Paris, he frequently obtained leave of absence and came to visit her; and he would remain shut up in her apartments until his time expired. One evening my spies brought me word that he was there. I hastened to the house. My presence did not embarrass her. She received me as usual, throwing her arms about my neck. I thought that my spies had deceived me; and I was going to tell her all when I saw upon the piano a buckskin glove, such as are worn by soldiers. Not wishing a scene, and not knowing to what excess my anger might carry me, I rushed out of the place without saying a word. I have never seen her since. She wrote to me. I did not open her letters. She attempted to force her way into my presence, but in vain; my servants had orders that they dared not ignore."

Could this be the Comte de Commarin, celebrated for his haughty coldness, for his reserve so full of disdain, who spoke thus, who opened his whole life without restrictions, without reserve? And to whom? To a stranger. But he was in one of those desperate states, allied to madness, when all reflection leaves us, when we must find some outlet to a too powerful emotion. What mattered to him this secret, so courageously borne for so many years? He disburdened himself of it, like the poor man, who, weighed down by a too heavy burden, casts it to the earth without caring where it falls, nor how much it may tempt the cupidity of the passers-by.

"Nothing," continued he, "no, nothing, can approach to what

I then endured. My very heartstrings were bound up in that woman. She was like a part of myself. In separating from her, it seemed to me that I was tearing away a part of my own flesh. I can not describe the furious passions her memory stirred within me. I scorned her and longed for her with equal vehemence. I hated her and I loved her. And to this day her detestable image has been ever present to my imagination. Nothing can make me forget her. I have never consoled myself for her loss. And that is not all; terrible doubts about Albert occurred to me. Was I really his father? Can you understand what my punishment was when I thought to myself, 'I have perhaps sacrificed my own son to the child of an utter stranger. This thought made me hate the bastard who called himself Commarin. To my great affection for him succeeded an unconquerable aversion. How often in those days I struggled against an insane desire to kill him! Since then I have learned to subdue my aversion; but I have never completely mastered it. Albert, sir, has been the best of sons. Nevertheless, there has always been an icy barrier between us, which he was unable to explain. I have often been on the point of appealing to the tribunals, of avowing all, of reclaiming my legitimate heir; but regard for my rank has prevented me. I recoiled before the scandal. I feared the ridicule or disgrace that would attach to my name; and yet I have not been able to save it from infamy." The old nobleman remained silent after pronouncing these words. In a fit of despair he buried his face in his hands, and two great tears rolled silently down his wrinkled cheeks. In the mean time, the door of the room opened slightly, and the tall clerk's head appeared. M. Daburon signed to him to enter, and then addressing M. de Commarin, he said in a voice rendered more gentle by compassion: "Sir, in the eyes of heaven, as in the eyes of society, you have committed a great sin; and the results, as you see, are most disastrous. It is your duty to repair the evil consequences of your sin as much as lies in your power."—"Such is my intention, sir, and, may I say so? my dearest wish."—"You doubtless understand me," continued M. Daburon.—"Yes, sir," replied the old man; "yes, I understand you."

"It will be a consolation to you," added the magistrate, "to learn that M. Noel Gerdy is worthy in all respects of the high position that you are about to restore to him. He is a man of great talent, better and worthier than any one I know. You

will have a son worthy of his ancestors. And, finally, no one of your family has disgraced it, sir, for Vicomte Albert is not a Commarin."

"No," rejoined the comte quickly, "a Commarin would be dead at this hour; and blood washes all away."

The old nobleman's remark set the investigating magistrate thinking profoundly. "Are you, then, sure," said he, "of the vicomte's guilt?" M. de Commarin gave the magistrate a look of intense surprise. "I only arrived in Paris yesterday evening," he replied, "and I am entirely ignorant of all that has occurred. I only know that justice would not proceed without good cause against a man of Albert's rank. If you have arrested him, it is quite evident that you have something more than suspicion against him—that you possess positive proofs."

M. Daburon bit his lips, and for a moment could not conceal a feeling of displeasure. He had neglected his usual prudence, had moved too quickly. He had believed the comte's mind entirely upset; and now he had aroused his distrust. All the skill in the world could not repair such an unfortunate mistake. A witness on his guard is no longer a witness to be depended upon; he trembles for fear of compromising himself, measures the weight of the questions, and hesitates as to his answers. On the other hand, justice, in the form of a magistrate, is disposed to doubt everything, to imagine everything, and to suspect everybody. How far was the comte a stranger to the crime at La Jonchere? Although doubting Albert's paternity, he would certainly have made great efforts to save him. His story showed that he thought his honor in peril just as much as his son. Was he not the man to suppress, by every means, an inconvenient witness? Thus reasoned M. Daburon. And yet he could not clearly see how the Comte de Commarin's interests were concerned in the matter. This uncertainty made him very uneasy. "Sir," he asked more sternly, "when were you informed of the discovery of your secret?"

"Last evening, by Albert himself. He spoke to me of this sad story in a way which I now seek in vain to explain, unless—" The comte stopped short, as if his reason had been struck by the improbability of the supposition which he had formed. "Unless!—" inquired the magistrate eagerly.—"Sir," said the comte, without replying directly, "Albert is a hero if he is not guilty."

"Ah!" said the magistrate quickly, "have you, then, reason

to think him innocent?" M. Daburon's spite was so plainly visible in the tone of his words that M. de Commarin could and ought to have seen the semblance of an insult. He started, evidently offended, and, rising, said: "I am now no more a witness for than I was a moment ago a witness against. I desire only to render what assistance I can to justice, in accordance with my duty."

"Confound it," said M. Daburon to himself, "here I have offended him now! Is this the way to do things, making mistake after mistake?"

"The facts are these," resumed the comte. "Yesterday, after having spoken to me of these cursed letters, Albert began to set a trap to discover the truth—for he still had doubts, Noel Gerdy not having obtained the complete correspondence. An animated discussion arose between us. He declared his resolution to give way to Noel. I, on the other hand, was resolved to compromise the matter, cost what it might. Albert dared to oppose me. All my efforts to convert him to my views were useless. Vainly I tried to touch those chords in his breast which I supposed the most sensitive. He firmly repeated his intention to retire in spite of me, declaring himself satisfied if I would consent to allow him a modest competence. I again attempted to shake him by showing him that his marriage, so ardently looked forward to for two years, would be broken off by this blow. He replied that he felt sure of the constancy of his betrothed, Mademoiselle d'Arlange."

This name fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the investigating magistrate. He jumped in his chair. Feeling that his face was turning crimson, he took up a large bundle of papers from his table, and, to hide his emotion, he raised them to his face, as though trying to decipher an illegible word. He began to understand the difficult duty with which he was charged. He knew that he was troubled like a child, having neither his usual calmness nor foresight. He felt that he might commit the most serious blunders. Why had he undertaken this investigation? Could he preserve himself quite free from bias? Did he think his will would be perfectly impartial? Gladly would be put off to another time the further examination of the comte; but could he? His conscience told him that this would be another blunder. He renewed, then, the painful examination. "Sir," said he, "the sentiments expressed by the vicomte are very fine, without doubt; but did he not mention

Widow Lerouge?"—"Yes," replied the comte, who appeared suddenly to brighten, as by the remembrance of some unnoticed circumstances—"yes, certainly."—"He must have shown you that this woman's testimony rendered a struggle with M. Gerdy impossible."

"Precisely, sir; and, aside from the question of duty, it was upon that that he based his refusal to follow my wishes."

"It will be necessary, comte, for you to repeat to me very exactly all that passed between the vicomte and yourself. Appeal, then, I beseech you, to your memory, and try to repeat his own words as nearly as possible." M. de Commarin could do so without much difficulty. For some little time a salutary reaction had taken place within him. His blood, excited by the persistence of the examination, moved in its accustomed course. His brain cleared itself. The scene of the previous evening was admirably presented to his memory, even to the most insignificant details. The sound of Albert's voice was still in his ears; he saw again his expressive gestures. As his story advanced, alive with clearness and precision, M. Daburon's conviction became more confirmed. The magistrate turned against Albert precisely that which the day before had won the comte's admiration. "What wonderful acting!" thought he. "Tabaret is decidedly possessed of second-sight. To his inconceivable boldness this young man joins an infernal cleverness. The genius of crime itself inspires him. It is a miracle that we are able to unmask him. How well everything was foreseen and arranged? How marvelously this scene with his father was brought about, in order to procure doubt in case of discovery? There is not a sentence which lacks a purpose, which does not tend to ward off suspicion. What refinement of execution? What excessive care for details! Nothing is wanting, not even the great devotion of his betrothed. Has he really informed Claire? Probably I might find out; but I should have to see her again, to speak to her. Poor child! to love such a man! But his plan is now fully exposed. His discussion with the comte was his plank of safety. It committed him to nothing, and gained time. He would of course raise objections, since they would only end by binding him the more firmly in his father's heart. He could thus make a merit of his compliance, and would ask a reward for his weakness. And when Noel returned to the charge, he would find himself in presence of the comte, who would boldly deny everything,

politely refuse to have anything to do with him, and would possibly have him driven out of the house as an impostor and forger."

It was a strange coincidence, but yet easily explained, that M. de Commarin, while telling his story, arrived at the same ideas as the magistrate, and at conclusions almost identical. In fact, why that persistence with respect to Claudine? He remembered plainly, that, in his anger, he had said to his son, "Mankind is not in the habit of doing such fine actions for its own satisfaction." That great disinterestedness was now explained.

When the comte had ceased speaking, M. Daburon said: "I thank you, sir. I can say nothing positive; but justice has weighty reasons to believe that, in the scene which you have just related to me, Vicomte Albert played a part previously arranged."—"And well arranged," murmured the comte; "for he deceived me!" He was interrupted by the entrance of Noel, who carried under his arm a black shagreen portfolio, ornamented with his monogram. The barrister bowed to the old gentleman, who in his turn rose and retired politely to the end of the room. "Sir," said Noel, in an undertone to the magistrate, "you will find all the letters in this portfolio. I must ask permission to leave you at once, as Madame Gerdy's condition grows hourly more alarming."

Noel had raised his voice a little, in pronouncing these last words; and the comte heard them. He started, and made a great effort to restrain the question which leaped from his heart to his lips. "You must however give me a moment, my dear sir," replied the magistrate. M. Daburon then quitted his chair, and, taking the barrister by the hand, led him to the comte. "M. de Commarin," said he, "I have the honor of presenting to you M. Noel Gerdy." M. de Commarin was probably expecting some scene of this kind, for not a muscle of his face moved; he remained perfectly calm. Noel, on his side, was like a man who had received a blow on the head; he staggered, and was obliged to seek support from the back of a chair. Then these two, father and son, stood face to face, apparently deep in thought, but in reality examining one another with mutual distrust, each striving to gather something of the other's thoughts. M. Daburon had augured better results from this meeting, which he had been awaiting ever since the comte's arrival. He had expected that this abrupt presentation would bring about an intensely pathetic scene,

which would not give his two witnesses time for reflection. The comte would open his arms; Noel would throw himself into them; and this reconciliation would only await the sanction of the tribunals, to be complete. The coldness of the one, the embarrassment of the other, disconcerted his plans. He therefore thought it necessary to intervene. "Comte," said he reproachfully, "remember that it was only a few minutes ago that you admitted that M. Gerdy was your legitimate son." M. de Commarin made no reply; to judge from his lack of emotion, he could not have heard. So Noel, summoning all his courage, venture to speak first. "Sir," he stammered, "I entertain no—"

"You may call me father," interrupted the haughty old man, in a tone which was by no means affectionate. Then addressing the magistrate he said: "Can I be of any further use to you, sir?"

"Only to hear your evidence read over," replied M. Daburon, "and to sign it if you find everything correct. You can proceed, Constant," he added.

The tall clerk turned half round on his chair and commenced. He had a peculiar way of jabbering over what he had scrawled. He read very quickly, all at a stretch, without paying the least attention to either full stops or commas, questions or replies, but went on reading as long as his breath lasted. When he could go on no longer, he took a breath, and then continued as before. Unconsciously, he reminded one of a diver, who every now and then raise his head above water, obtains a supply of air, and disappears again. Noel was the only one to listen attentively to the reading, which to unpractised ears was unintelligible. It apprised him of many things which it was important for him to know. At last Constant pronounced the words, "In testimony whereof," etc., which end all official reports in France. He handed the pen to the comte, who signed without hesitation. The old nobleman then turned toward Noel. "I am not very strong," he said; "you must therefore, my son," emphasizing the word, "help your father to his carriage."

The young barrister advanced eagerly. His face brightened, as he passed the count's arm through his own. When they were gone M. Daburon could not resist an impulse of curiosity. He hastened to the door, which he opened slightly; and, keeping his body in the background, that he might not himself be

seen, he looked out into the passage. The comte and Noel had not yet reached the end. They were going slowly. The comte seemed to drag heavily and painfully along; the barrister took short steps, bending slightly toward his father; and all his movements were marked with the greatest solicitude. The magistrate remained watching them until they passed out of sight at the end of the gallery. Then he returned to his seat, heaving a deep sigh. "At least," thought he, "I have helped to make one person happy. The day will not be entirely a bad one."

But he had no time to give way to his thoughts, the hours flew by so quickly. He wished to interrogate Albert as soon as possible; and he had still to receive the evidence of several of the comte's servants, and the report of the commissary of police charged with the arrest. The servants who had been waiting their turn a long while, were now brought in without delay, and examined separately. They had but little information to give; but the testimony of each was, so to say, a fresh accusation. It was easy to see that all believed their master guilty. Albert's conduct since the beginning of the fatal week, his least words, his most insignificant movements, were reported, commented upon, and explained. The man who lives in the midst of thirty servants is like an insect in a glass box under the magnifying glass of a naturalist. Not one of his acts escapes their notice; he can scarcely have a secret of his own; and, if they can not divine what it is, they at least know that he has one. From morn till night, he is the point of observation for thirty pairs of eyes, interested in studying the slightest changes in his countenance. The magistrate obtained, therefore, an abundance of those frivolous details which seem nothing at first; but the slightest of which may, at the trial, become a question of life or death. By combining these depositions, reconciling them and putting them in order, M. Daburon was able to follow his prisoner hour by hour from the Sunday morning. Directly Noel left, the vicomte gave orders that all visitors should be informed that he had gone into the country. From that moment, the whole household perceived that something had gone wrong with him, that he was very much annoyed, or very unwell. He did not leave his study on that day, but had his dinner brought up to him. He ate very little—only some soup, and a very thin fillet of sole with white wine. While eating, he said to M. Courtois,

the butler: "Remind the cook to spice the sauce a little more, in future," and then added in a low tone, "Ah! to what purpose?" In the evening he dismissed his servants from all duties, saying, "Go, and amuse yourselves." He expressly warned them not to disturb him unless he rang. On the Monday, he did not get up until noon, although usually an early riser. He complained of a violent headache, and of feeling sick. He took, however a cup of tea. He ordered his brougham, but almost immediately countermanded the order. Lubin, his valet, heard him say: "I am hesitating too much"; and a few moments later, "I must make up my mind." Shortly afterward he began writing. He then gave Lubin a letter to carry to Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, with orders to deliver it only to herself or to Mademoiselle Schmidt, the governess. A second letter, containing two thousand-frank notes, was intrusted to Joseph, to be taken to the vicomte's club. Joseph no longer remembered the name of the person to whom the letter was addressed; but it was not a person of title. That evening, Albert only took a little soup, and remained shut up in his room.

He rose early on the Tuesday. He wandered about the house, as though he was in great trouble, or impatiently awaiting something which did not arrive. On his going into the garden, the gardener asked his advice concerning a lawn. He replied, "You had better consult the comte upon his return." He did not breakfast any more than the day before. About one o'clock, he went down to the stables, and caressed, with an air of sadness, his favorite mare, Norma. Stroking her neck, he said, "Poor creature! poor old girl!" At three o'clock, a messenger arrived with a letter. The vicomte took it, and opened it hastily. He was then near the flower-garden. Two footmen distinctly heard him say, "She can not resist." He returned to the house, and burned the letter in a large stove in the hall. As he was sitting down to dinner, at six o'clock, two of his friends, M. de Courtivois and the Marquis de Chouze, insisted upon seeing him, in spite of all orders. They would not be refused. These gentlemen were anxious for him to join them in some pleasure party, but he declined, saying that he had a very important appointment. At dinner he ate a little more than on the previous days. He even asked the butler for a bottle of Chateau-Lafite, the whole of which he drank himself. While taking his coffee, he smoked a cigar

in the dining-room, contrary to the rules of the house. At half-past seven, according to Joseph and two footmen, or at eight according to the Swiss porter and Lubin, the vicomte went out on foot, taking an umbrella with him. He returned home at two o'clock in the morning, and at once dismissed his valet, who had waited up for him. On entering the vicomte's room on the Wednesday, the valet was struck with the condition in which he found his master's clothes. They were wet, and stained with mud; the trousers were torn. He ventured to make a remark about them. Albert replied, in a furious manner, "Throw the old things in a corner, ready to be given away." He appeared to be much better all that day. He breakfasted with a good appetite; and the butler noticed that he was in excellent spirits. He passed the afternoon in the library, and burned a pile of papers. On the Thursday, he again seemed very unwell. He was scarcely able to go and meet the comte. That evening, after his interview with his father, he went to his room looking extremely ill. Lubin wanted to run for the doctor; he forbade him to do so, or to mention to any one that he was not well.

Such was the substance of twenty large pages, which the tall clerk had covered with writing, without once turning his head to look at the witnesses who passed by in their fine livery. M. Daburon managed to obtain this evidence in less than two hours. Though well aware of the importance of their testimony, all these servants were very voluble. The difficulty was, to stop them when they had once started. From all they said, it appeared that Albert was a very good master—easily served, kind and polite to his servants. Wonderful to relate! there were found three among them who did not appear perfectly delighted at the misfortune which had befallen the family. Two were greatly distressed. M. Lubin, although he had been an object of especial kindness, was not one of these.

The turn of the commissary of police had now come. In a few words, he gave an account of the arrest, already described by old Tabaret. He did not forget to mention the one word "Lost," which had escaped Albert; to his mind, it was a confession. He then delivered all the articles seized in the Vicomte de Commarin's apartments. The magistrate carefully examined these things, and compared them closely with the scraps of evidence gathered at La Jonchere. He soon appeared, more than ever satisfied with the course he had taken. He then

placed all these material proofs upon his table, and covered them over with three or four large sheets of paper. The day was far advanced; and M. Daburon had no more than sufficient time to examine the prisoner before night. He now remembered that he had tasted nothing since morning; and he sent hastily for a bottle of wine and some biscuits. It was not strength, however, that the magistrate needed; it was courage. All the while that he was eating and drinking, his thoughts kept repeating this strange sentence, "I am about to appear before the Vicomte de Commarin." At any other time, he would have laughed at the absurdity of the idea, but, at this moment, it seemed to him like the will of Providence.

"So be it," said he to himself; "this is my punishment." And immediately he gave the necessary orders for Vicomte Albert to be brought before him.

XII

ALBERT scarcely noticed his removal from home to the seclusion of the prison. Snatched away from his painful thoughts by the harsh voice of the commissary, saying, "In the name of the law I arrest you," his mind, completely upset, was a long time in recovering its equilibrium. Everything that followed appeared to him to float indistinctly in a thick mist, like those dream-scenes represented on the stage behind a quadruple curtain of gauze. To the questions put to him he replied, without knowing what he said. Two police agents took hold of his arms, and helped him down the stairs. He could not have walked down alone. His limbs, which bent beneath him, refused their support. The only thing he understood of all that was said around him was that the comte had been struck with apoplexy; but even that he soon forgot. They lifted him into the cab, which was waiting in the court-yard at the foot of the steps, rather ashamed at finding itself in such a place; and by placing him on the back seat. Two police agents installed themselves in front of him; while a third mounted the box by the side of the driver. During the

drive, he did not at all realize his situation. He lay perfectly motionless in the dirty, greasy vehicle. His body, which followed every jolt, scarcely allayed by the worn-out springs, rolled from one side to the other; and his head oscillated on his shoulders, as if the muscles of his neck were broken. He thought of Widow Lerouge. He recalled her as she was when he went with his father to La Jonchere. It was in the springtime; and the hawthorn blossoms scented the air. The old woman, in a white cap, stood at her garden gate; she spoke beseechingly. The count looked sternly at her as he listened; then, taking some gold from his purse, he gave it to her.

On arriving at their destination they lifted him out of the cab, the same way as they had lifted him in at starting. During the formality of entering his name in the jail book, in the dingy, stinking record office, and while replying mechanically to everything, he gave himself up with delight to recollections of Claire. He went back to the time of the early days of their love, when he doubted whether he would ever have the happiness of being loved by her in return; when they used to meet at Mademoiselle Goello's. This old maid had a house on the left bank of the Seine, furnished in the most eccentric manner. On all the drawing-room furniture, and on the mantelpiece, were placed a dozen or fifteen stuffed dogs, of various breeds, which together or successively had helped to cheer the maiden's lonely hours. She loved to relate stories of these pets, whose affection had never failed her. Some were grotesque, others horrible. One especially, outrageously stuffed, seemed ready to burst. How many times he and Claire had laughed at it until the tears came!

The officials next began to search him. This crowning humiliation, those rough hands passing all over his body, brought him somewhat to himself, and roused his anger. But it was already over; they at once dragged him along the dark corridors, over the filthy, slippery floor. They opened a door, and pushed him into a small cell. He then heard them lock and bolt the door. He was a prisoner, and, in accordance with special orders, in solitary confinement. He immediately felt a marked sensation of comfort. He was alone. No more stifled whispers, harsh voices, implacable questions, sounded in his ears. A profound silence reigned around. It seemed to him that he had forever escaped from society; and he rejoiced at it. He would have felt relieved, had this even been

the silence of the grave. His body, as well as his mind, was weighted down with weariness. He wanted to sit down, when he perceived a small bed, to the right, in front of the grated window, which let in the little light there was. This bed was as welcome to him as a plank would be to a drowning man. He threw himself upon it, and lay down with delight; but he felt cold, so he unfolded the coarse woolen coverlid, and wrapping it about him, was soon sound asleep.

In the corridor, two detectives, one still young, the other rather old, applied alternately their eyes and ears to the peephole in the door, watching every movement of the prisoner: "What a fellow he is!" murmured the younger officer. "If a man has no more nerve than that, he ought to remain honest. He won't care much about his looks the morning of his execution, eh, M. Balan?"—"That depends," replied the other. "We must wait and see. Lecoq told me that he was a terrible rascal."—"Ah! look, he arranges his bed and lies down. Can he be going to sleep? That's good! It's the first time I ever saw such a thing."—"It is because, comrade, you have only had dealings with the smaller rogues. All rascals of position—and I have had to do with more than one—are this sort. At the moment of arrest, they are incapable of anything; their heart fails them; but they recover themselves next day."—"Upon my word, one would say he has gone to sleep! What a joke!"—"I tell you, my friend," added the old man, pointedly, "that nothing is more natural. I am sure that, since the blow was struck, this young fellow has hardly lived: his body has been all on fire. Now he knows that his secret is out; and that quiets him."—"Ha, ha! M. Balan, you are joking: you say that that quiets him?"—"Certainly. There is no greater punishment, remember, than anxiety; everything is preferable. If you only possessed an income of ten thousand francs, I would show you a way to prove this. I would tell you to go to Hamburg and risk your entire fortune on one chance at *rouge et noir*. You could relate to me, afterward, what your feelings were while the ball was rolling. It is, my boy, as though your brain was being torn with pincers, as though molten lead was being poured into your bones, in place of marrow. This anxiety is so strong that one feels relieved, one breathes again, even when one has lost. It is ruin; but then the anxiety is over."—"Really, M. Balan, one would think that you yourself had had just such an experience."—"Alas!" sighed the old de-

tective, "it is to my love, queen of spades, my unhappy love, that you owe the honor of looking through this peep-hole in my company. But this fellow will sleep for a couple of hours, do not lose sight of him; I am going to smoke a cigarette in the courtyard."

Albert slept four hours. On awaking his head seemed clearer than it had been ever since his interview with Noel. It was a terrible moment for him when, for the first time, he became fully aware of his situation. "Now, indeed," said he, "I require all my courage." He longed to see some one, to speak, to be questioned, to explain. He felt a desire to call out. "But what good would that be?" he asked himself. "Some one will be coming soon." He looked for his watch, to see what time it was, and found that they had taken it away. He felt this deeply; they were treating him like the most abandoned of villains. He felt in his pockets: they had all been carefully emptied. He thought now of his personal appearance; and, getting up, he repaired as much as possible the disorder of his toilet. He put his clothes in order, and dusted them; he straightened his collar, and retied his cravat. Then pouring a little water on his handkerchief, he passed it over his face, bathing his eyes, which were greatly inflamed. Then he endeavored to smooth his beard and hair. He had no idea that four lynx eyes were fixed upon him all the while.

"Good!" murmured the young detective: "see how our cock sticks up his comb, and smooths his feathers!"

"I told you," put in Balan, "that he was only staggered. Hush! he is speaking, I believe."

But they neither surprised one of those disordered gestures nor one of those incoherent speeches, which almost always escape from the feeble when excited by fear, or from the imprudent ones who believe in the discretion of their cells. One word alone, "honor," reached the ears of the two spies. "These rascals of rank," grumbled Balan, "always have this word in their mouths. That which they most fear is the opinion of some dozen friends, and several thousand strangers, who read the 'Gazette des Tribunaux.' They only think of their own heads later on."

When the gendarmes came to conduct Albert before the investigating magistrate, they found him seated on the side of his bed, his feet pressed upon the iron rail, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands. He rose as they en-

tered, and took a few steps toward them; but his throat was so dry that he was scarcely able to speak. He asked for a moment, and, turning toward the little table, he filled and drank two large glassfuls of water in succession. "I am ready!" he then said. And, with a firm step, he followed the gendarmes along the passage which led to the Palais de Justice.

M. Daburon was just then in great anguish. He walked furiously up and down his office, awaiting the prisoner. Again, and for the twentieth time since morning, he regretted having engaged in the business. "Curse this absurd point of honor, which I have obeyed," he inwardly exclaimed. "I in vain attempt to reassure myself by the aid of sophisms. I was wrong in not withdrawing. Nothing in the world can change my feelings toward this young man. I hate him. I am his judge; and it is no less true that at one time I longed to assassinate him. I faced him with a revolver in my hand: why did I not present it and fire? Do I know why? What power held my finger, when an almost insensible pressure would have sufficed to kill him? I can not say. Why is not he the judge and I the assassin? If the intention was as punishable as the deed, I ought to be guillotined. And it is under such conditions that I dare examine him!" Passing before the door he heard the heavy footsteps of the gendarmes in the passage. "It is he," he said aloud; and then hastily seated himself at his table, bending over his portfolios, as though striving to hide himself. If the tall clerk had used his eyes, he would have noticed the singular spectacle of an investigating magistrate more agitated than the prisoner he was about to examine. But he was blind to all around him; and, at this moment, he was only aware of an error of fifteen centimes, which had slipped into his accounts, and which he was unable to rectify. Albert entered the magistrate's office with his head erect. His features bore traces of great fatigue and of sleepless nights. He was very pale; but his eyes were clear and sparkling.

The usual questions which open such examinations gave M. Daburon an opportunity to recover himself. Fortunately, he had found time in the morning to prepare a plan, which he had now simply to follow. "You are aware, sir," he commenced in a tone of perfect politeness, "that you have no right to the name you bear?"

"I know, sir," replied Albert, "that I am the natural son of M. de Commarin. I know further that my father would be

unable to recognize me, even if he wished to, since I was born during his married life."

"What were your feelings upon learning this?"

"I should speak falsely, sir, if I had said I did not feel very bitterly. When one is in the high position I occupied, the fall is terrible. However, I never for a moment entertained the thought of contesting M. Noel Gerdy's rights. I always purposed, and still purpose, to yield. I have so informed M. de Commarin."

M. Daburon expected just such a reply; and it only strengthened his suspicions. Did it not enter into the line of defense which he had foreseen? It was now his duty to seek some way of demolishing this defense, in which the prisoner evidently meant to shut himself up like a tortoise in its shell. "You could not oppose M. Gerdy," continued the magistrate, "with any chance of success. You had, indeed, on your side, the comte, and your mother; but M. Gerdy was in possession of evidence that was certain to win his cause, that of Widow Lerouge."—"I have never doubted that, sir."—"Now," continued the magistrate, seeking to hide the look which he fastened upon Albert, "justice supposes that, to do away with the only existing proof, you have assassinated Widow Lerouge."

This terrible accusation, terribly emphasized, caused no change in Albert's features. He preserved the same firm bearing, without bravado. "Before God," he answered, "and by all that is most sacred on earth, I swear to you, sir, that I am innocent! I am at this moment a close prisoner, without communication with the outer world, reduced consequently to the most absolute helplessness. It is through your probity that I hope to demonstrate my innocence."

"What an actor!" thought the magistrate. "Can crime be so strong as this?" He glanced over his papers, reading certain passages of the preceding depositions, turning down the corners of certain pages which contained important information. Then suddenly he resumed: "When you were arrested, you cried out: 'I am lost.' What did you mean by that?"

"Sir," replied Albert, "I remember having uttered those words. When I knew of what crime I was accused, I was overwhelmed with consternation. My mind was, as it were, enlightened by a glimpse of the future. In a moment, I perceived all the horror of my situation. I understood the weight of the accusation, its probability, and the difficulties I should

have in defending myself. A voice cried out to me: 'Who was most interested in Claudine's death?' And the knowledge of my imminent peril forced from me the exclamation you speak of."

His explanation was more than plausible, was possible, and even likely. It had the advantage, too, of anticipating the axiom: "Search out the one whom the crime will benefit!" Tabaret had spoken truly, when he said that they would not easily make the prisoner confess. M. Daburon admired Albert's presence of mind, and the resources of his perverse imagination.

"You do indeed," continued the magistrate, "appear to have had the greatest interest in this death. Moreover, I will inform you that robbery was not the object of the crime. The things thrown into the Seine have been recovered. We know, also, that all the widow's papers were burned. Could they compromise any one but yourself? If you know of any one, speak."—"What can I answer, sir? Nothing."—"Have you often gone to see this woman?"—"Three or four times with my father."—"One of your coachmen pretends to have driven you there at least ten times."—"The man is mistaken. But what matters the number of visits?"—"Do you recollect the arrangements of the rooms? Can you describe them?"—"Perfectly, sir: there were two. Claudine slept in the back room."—"You were in no way a stranger to Widow Lerouge. If you had knocked one evening at her window-shutter, do you think she would have let you in?"—"Certainly, sir, and eagerly."—"You have been unwell these last few days?"—"Very unwell, to say the least, sir. My body bent under the weight of a burden too great for my strength. It was not, however, for want of courage."—"Why did you forbid your valet, Lubin, to call in the doctor?"—"Ah, sir, how could the doctor cure my disease? All his science could not make me the legitimate son of the Comte de Commarin."—"Some very singular remarks made by you were overheard. You seemed to be no longer interested in anything concerning your home. You destroyed a large number of papers and letters."—"I had decided to leave the comte, sir. My resolution explains my conduct."

Albert replied promptly to the magistrate's questions, without the least embarrassment, and in a confident tone. His voice, which was very pleasant to the ear, did not tremble. It concealed no emotion; it retained its pure and vibrating sound.

M. Daburon deemed it wise to suspend the examination for a short time. With so cunning an adversary, he was evidently pursuing a false course. To proceed in detail was folly; he neither intimidated the prisoner, nor made him break through his reserve. It was necessary to take him unawares.

"Sir," resumed the magistrate, abruptly, "tell me exactly how you passed your time last Tuesday evening, from six o'clock until midnight?"

For the first time, Albert seemed disconcerted. His glance, which had, till then, been fixed upon the magistrate, wavered. "During Tuesday evening," he stammered, repeating the phrase to gain time.

"I have him," thought the magistrate, starting with joy, and then added aloud: "Yes, from six o'clock until midnight."

"I am afraid, sir," answered Albert, "it will be difficult for me to satisfy you. I haven't a very good memory."

"Oh, don't tell me that!" interrupted the magistrate. "If I had asked what you were doing three months ago, on a certain evening, and at a certain hour, I could understand your hesitation; but this is about Tuesday, and it is now Friday. Moreover, this day, so close, was the last of the carnival; it was Shrove Tuesday. That circumstance ought to help your memory."

"That evening I went out walking," murmured Albert.—"Now," continued the magistrate, "where did you dine?"—"At home, as usual."—"No, not as usual. At the end of your meal, you asked for a bottle of Bordeaux, of which you drank the whole. You doubtless had need of some extra excitement for your subsequent plans."—"I had no plans," replied the prisoner with very evident uneasiness.—"You make a mistake. Two friends came to seek you. You replied to them, before sitting down to dinner, that you had a very important engagement to keep."—"That was only a polite way of getting rid of them."—"Why?"—"Can you not understand, sir? I was resigned, but not comforted. I was learning to get accustomed to the terrible blow. Would not one seek solitude in the great crisis of one's life?"—"The prosecution pretends that you wished to be left alone that you might go to La Jonchere. During the day you said: 'She can not resist me.' Of whom were you speaking?"—"Of some one to whom I had written the evening before, and who had replied to me. I spoke the words, with her letter still in my hands."—"This letter was, then,

from a woman?"—"Yes."—"What have you done with it?"—"I have burned it."—"This precaution leads one to suppose that you considered the letter compromising."—"Not at all, sir; it treated entirely of private matters."

M. Daburon was sure that this letter came from Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Should he nevertheless ask the question, and again hear pronounced the name of Claire, which always aroused such painful emotions within him? He ventured to do so, leaning over his papers, so that the prisoner could not detect his emotion. "From whom did this letter come?" he asked.

"From one whom I can not name."

"Sir," said the magistrate severely, "I will not conceal from you that your position is greatly compromised. Do not aggravate it by this culpable reticence. You are here to tell everything, sir."

"My own affairs, yes, not those of others."

Albert gave this last answer in a dry tone. He was giddy, flurried, exasperated, by the prying and irritating mode of the examination, which scarcely gave him time to breathe. The magistrate's questions fell upon him more thickly than the blows of the blacksmith's hammer upon the red-hot iron which he is anxious to beat into shape before it cools. The apparent rebellion of his prisoner troubled M. Daburon a great deal. He was further extremely surprised to find the discernment of the old detective at fault; just as though Tabaret were infallible. Tabaret had predicted an unexceptionable alibi; and this alibi was not forthcoming. Why? Had this subtle villain something better than that? What artful defense had he to fall back upon? Doubtless he kept in reserve some unforeseen stroke, perhaps irresistible. "Gently," thought the magistrate. "I have not got him yet." Then he quickly added aloud: "Continue. After dinner what did you do?"—"I went out for a walk."—"Not immediately. The bottle emptied, you smoked a cigar in the dining-room, which was so unusual as to be noticed. What kind of cigars do you usually smoke?"—"Trabucos."—"Do you not use a cigar-holder, to keep your lips from contact with the tobacco?"—"Yes, sir," replied Albert, much surprised at this series of questions.—"At what time did you go out?"—"About eight o'clock."—"Did you carry an umbrella?"—"Yes."—"Where did you go?"—"I walked about."—"Alone, without any object, all the evening?"—"Yes, sir."—"Now trace out your wanderings for me very carefully."

"Ah, sir, that is very difficult to do! I went out simply to walk about, for the sake of exercise, to drive away the torpor which had depressed me for three days. I don't know whether you can picture to yourself my exact condition. I was half out of my mind. I walked about at hazard along the quays. I wandered through the streets—"

"All that is very improbable," interrupted the magistrate. M. Daburon, however, knew that it was at least possible. Had not he himself, one night, in a similar condition, traversed all Paris? What reply could he have made, had some one asked him next morning where he had been, except that he had not paid attention, and did not know? But he had forgotten this; and his previous hesitations, too, had all vanished. As the inquiry advanced, the fever of investigation took possession of him. He enjoyed the emotions of the struggle, his passion for his calling became stronger than ever. He was again an investigating magistrate, like the fencing master, who, once practising with his dearest friend, became excited by the clash of the weapons, and, forgetting himself, killed him.

"So," resumed M. Daburon, "you met absolutely no one who can affirm that he saw you? You did not speak to a living soul? You entered no place, not even a cafe, or a theatre, or a tobacconist's to light one of your favorite trabucos?"

"No sir."

"Well, it is a great misfortune for you, yes, a very great misfortune; for I must inform you that it was precisely during this Tuesday evening, between eight o'clock and midnight, that Widow Lerouge was assassinated. Justice can point out the exact hour. Again, sir, in your own interest, I recommend you to reflect—to make a strong appeal to your memory."

This pointing out of the exact day and hour of the murder seemed to astound Albert. He raised his hand to his forehead with a despairing gesture. However, he replied in a calm voice: "I am very unfortunate, sir: but I can recollect nothing." M. Daburon's surprise was immense. What, not an alibi? Nothing? This could be no snare nor system of defense. Was, then, this man as cunning as he had imagined? Doubtless. Only he had been taken unawares. He had never imagined it possible for the accusation to fall upon him; and it was almost by a miracle it had done so. The magistrate slowly raised, one by one, the large pieces of paper that covered the articles seized in Albert's rooms. "We will pass," he continued, "to the ex-

amination of the charges which weigh against you. Will you please come nearer? Do you recognize these articles as belonging to yourself?"—"Yes, sir, they are all mine."—"Well, take this foil. Who broke it?"—"I, sir, in fencing with M. de Courtivois, who can bear witness to it."—"He will be heard. Where is the broken end?"—"I do not know. You must ask Lubin, my valet."—"Exactly. He declares that he has hunted for it, and can not find it. I must tell you that the victim received the fatal blow from the sharpened end of a broken foil. This piece of stuff, on which the assassin wiped his weapon, is a proof of what I state."—"I beseech you, sir, to order a most minute search to be made. It is impossible that the other half of the foil is not to be found."—"Orders shall be given to that effect. Look, here is the exact imprint of the murderer's foot traced on this sheet of paper. I will place one of your boots upon it; and the sole, as you perceive, fits the tracing with the utmost precision. This plaster was poured into the hollow left by the heel: you observe that it is, in all respects, similar in shape to the heels of your own boots. I perceive, too, the mark of a peg, which appears in both."

Albert followed with marked anxiety every movement of the magistrate. It was plain that he was struggling against a growing terror. Was he attacked by that fright which overpowers the guilty when they see themselves on the point of being confounded. To all the magistrate's remarks, he answered in a low voice: "It is true—perfectly true."

"That is so," continued M. Daburon; "yet listen further, before attempting to defend yourself. The criminal had an umbrella. The end of this umbrella sank in the clayey soil; the round of wood which is placed at the end of the silk was found molded in the clay. Look at this clod of clay, raised with the utmost care; and now look at your umbrella. Compare the rounds. Are they alike, or not?"

"These things, sir," attempted Albert, "are manufactured in large quantities."

"Well, we will pass over that proof. Look at this cigar end, found on the scene of the crime, and tell me of what brand it is, and how it was smoked."

"It is a trabucos, and was smoked in a cigar-holder."

"Like these?" persisted the magistrate, pointing to the cigars and the amber and meerschaum-holders found in the vicomte's library.

"Yes!" murmured Albert, "it is a fatality—a strange coincidence."

"Patience; that is nothing, as yet. The assassin wore gloves. The victim, in the death struggle, seized his hands; and some pieces of kid remained in her nails. These have been preserved, and are here. They are of a lavender color, are they not? Now, here are the gloves which you wore on Tuesday. They, too, are lavender, and they are frayed. Compare these pieces of kid with your own gloves. Do they not correspond? Are they not of the same color, the same skin?" It was useless to deny it, equivocate, or seek subterfuges. The evidence was there, and it was irrefutable. While appearing to occupy himself solely with the objects lying upon his table, M. Daburon did not lose sight of the prisoner. Albert was terrified. A cold perspiration bathed his temples, and glided drop by drop down his cheeks. His hands trembled so much that they were of no use to him. In a choking voice he kept repeating: "It is horrible, horrible!"

"Finally," pursued the inexorable magistrate, "here are the trousers you wore on the evening of the murder. It is plain that not long ago they were very wet; and, besides the mud on them, there are traces of earth. Besides that, they are torn at the knees. We will admit, for the moment, that you might not remember where you went on that evening; but who would believe that you do not know where you tore your trousers and how you frayed your gloves!"

What courage could resist such assaults? Albert's firmness and energy were at an end. His brain whirled. He fell heavily into a chair, exclaiming: "It is enough to drive me mad!"

"Do you admit," insisted the magistrate, whose gaze had become firmly fixed upon the prisoner, "do you admit that Widow Lerouge could only have been stabbed by you?"

"I admit," protested Albert, "that I am the victim of one of those terrible fatalities which make men doubt the evidence of their reason. I am innocent."

"Then tell me where you passed Tuesday evening."

"Ah, sir!" cried the prisoner, "I should have to—" But, restraining himself, he added in a faint voice: "I have made the only answer that I can make."

M. Daburon rose, having now reached his grand stroke. "It is, then, my duty," said he, with a shade of irony, "to supply your failure of memory. I am going to remind you of where

you went and what you did. On Tuesday evening, at eight o'clock, after having obtained from the wine you drank the dreadful energy you needed, you left your home. At thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St. Lazare station. At nine o'clock, you alighted at the station at Reuil." And, not disdaining to employ old Tabaret's ideas, the investigating magistrate repeated nearly word for word the tirade improvised the night before by the amateur detective. He had every reason, while speaking, to admire the old fellow's penetration. In all his life, his eloquence had never produced so striking an effect. Every sentence, every word, told. The prisoner's assurance, already shaken, fell little by little, just like the outer coating of a wall when riddled with bullets. Albert was, as the magistrate perceived, like a man, who, rolling to the bottom of a precipice, sees every branch and every projection which might retard his fall fail him, and who feels a new and more painful bruise each time his body comes in contact with them.

"And now," concluded the investigating magistrate, "listen to good advice: do not persist in a system of denying, impossible to sustain. Give in. Justice, rest assured, is ignorant of nothing which it is important to know. Believe me; seek to deserve the indulgence of your judges; confess your guilt."

M. Daburon did not believe that his prisoner would still persist in asserting his innocence. He imagined he would be overwhelmed and confounded, that he would throw himself at his feet, begging for mercy. But he was mistaken. Albert, in spite of his great prostration, found, in one last effort of his will, sufficient strength to recover himself and again protest: "You are right, sir," he said in a sad but firm voice; "everything seems to prove me guilty. In your place, I should have spoken as you have done; yet all the same, I swear to you that I am innocent."

"Come now, do you really—" began the magistrate.

"I am innocent," interrupted Albert; "and I repeat it, without the least hope of changing in any way your conviction. Yes, everything speaks against me, everything, even my own bearing before you. It is true, my courage has been shaken by these incredible, miraculous, overwhelming coincidences. I am overcome, because I feel the impossibility of proving my innocence. But I do not despair. My honor and my life are in the hands of God. At this very hour when to you I appear lost—

for I in no way deceive myself, sir—I do not despair of a complete justification. I await confidently."

"What do you mean?" asked the magistrate.—"Nothing but what I say, sir."—"So you persist in denying your guilt?"—"I am innocent."—"But this is folly."—"I am innocent.—"Very well," said M. Daburon; "that is enough for to-day. You will hear the official report of your examination read, and will then be taken back to solitary confinement. I exhort you to reflect. Night will perhaps bring on a better feeling; if you wish at any time to speak to me, send word, and I will come to you. I will give orders to that effect. You may read now, Constant."

When Albert had departed under the escort of the gendarmes, the magistrate muttered in a low tone: "There's an obstinate fellow for you." He certainly no longer entertained the shadow of a doubt. To him, Albert was as surely the murderer as if he had admitted his guilt. Even if he should persist in his system of denial to the end of the investigation, it was impossible that, with the proofs already in the possession of the police, a true bill should not be found against him. He was therefore certain of being committed for trial at the assizes. It was a hundred to one that the jury would bring in a verdict of guilty. Left to himself, however, M. Daburon did not experience that intense satisfaction, mixed with vanity, which he ordinarily felt after he had successfully conducted an examination, and had succeeded in getting his prisoner into the same position as Albert. Something disturbed and shocked him. At the bottom of his heart, he felt ill at ease. He had triumphed; but his victory gave him only uneasiness, pain, and vexation. A reflection so simple that he could hardly understand why it had not occurred to him at first increased his discontent, and made him angry with himself. "Something told me," he muttered, "that I was wrong to undertake this business. I am punished for not having obeyed that inner voice. I ought to have declined to proceed with the investigation. The Vicomte de Commarin was, all the same, certain to be arrested, imprisoned, examined, confounded, tried, and probably condemned. Then, being in no way connected with the trial, I could have reappeared before Claire. Her grief will be great. As her friend, I could have soothed her, mingled my tears with hers, calmed her regrets. With time, she might have been consoled, and perhaps have forgotten him. She could not have helped feeling grateful to me, and then who knows—? While now,

whatever may happen, I shall be an object of loathing to her: she will never be able to endure the sight of me. In her eyes I shall always be her lover's assassin. I have with my own hands opened an abyss between her and myself which centuries could not fill up. I have lost her a second time, and by my own fault." The unhappy man heaped the bitterest reproaches upon himself. He was in despair. He had never so hated Albert—that wretch, who, stained with a crime, stood in the way of his happiness. Then, too, he cursed old Tabaret! Alone, he would not have decided so quickly. He would have waited, thought over the matter, matured his decision, and certainly have perceived the inconveniences which now occurred to him. The old fellow, always carried away like a badly trained bloodhound, and full of stupid enthusiasm, had confused him, and led him to do what he now so much regretted.

It was precisely this unfavorable moment that M. Tabaret chose for reappearing before the magistrate. He had just been informed of the termination of the inquiry; and he arrived, impatient to know what had passed, swelling with curiosity, and full of the sweet hope of hearing of the fulfilment of his predictions. "What answers did he make?" he asked even before he had closed the door.

"He is evidently guilty," replied the magistrate, with a harshness very different from his usual manner. Old Tabaret, who expected to receive praises by the basketful, was astounded at this tone! It was, therefore, with great hesitancy that he offered his further services. "I have come," he said modestly, "to know if any investigations are necessary to demolish the alibi pleaded by the prisoner."

"He pleaded no alibi," replied the magistrate, dryly.—"How," cried the detective, "no alibi? Pshaw! I ask pardon: he has, of course, then confessed everything."

"No," said the magistrate impatiently, "he has confessed nothing. He acknowledges that the proofs are decisive: he can not give an account of how he spent his time; but he protests his innocence." In the centre of the room, M. Tabaret stood with his mouth wide open, and his eyes staring wildly, and altogether in the most grotesque attitude his astonishment could effect. He was literally thunderstruck. In spite of his anger, M. Daburon could not help smiling: and even Constant gave a grin, which on his lips was equivalent to a paroxysm of laughter. "Not an alibi, nothing?" murmured the old fellow. "No

explanations? The idea! It is inconceivable! Not an alibi? We must then be mistaken: he can not be the criminal. That is certain!"

The investigating magistrate felt that the old amateur must have been waiting the result of the examination at the wine-shop round the corner, or else that he had gone mad. "Unfortunately," said he, "we are not mistaken. It is but too clearly shown that M. de Commarin is the murderer. However, if you like, you can ask Constant for his report of the examination, and read it over while I put these papers in order."—"Very well," said the old fellow with feverish anxiety. He sat down in Constant's chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, thrusting his hands in his hair, he in less than no time read the report through. When he had finished, he arose with pale and distorted features. "Sir," said he to the magistrate in a strange voice, "I have been the involuntary cause of a terrible mistake. This man is innocent."

"Come, come," said M. Daburon, without stopping his preparations for departure, "you are going out of your mind, my dear M. Tabaret. How, after all that you have read there, can—"

"Yes, sir, yes: it is because I have read this that I entreat you to pause, or we shall add one more mistake to the sad list of judicial errors. Read this examination over carefully; there is not a reply but which declares this unfortunate man innocent, not a word but which throws out a ray of light. And he is still in prison, still in solitary confinement?"

"He is; and there he will remain, if you please," interrupted the magistrate. "It becomes you well to talk in this manner, after the way you spoke last night, when I hesitated so much."

"But, sir," cried the old detective, "I still say precisely the same. Ah, wretched Tabaret! all is lost; no one understands you. Pardon me, sir, if I lack the respect due to you; but you have not grasped my method. It is, however, very simple. Given a crime, with all the circumstances and details, I construct, bit by bit, a plan of accusation, which I do not guarantee until it is entire and perfect. If a man is found to whom this plan applies exactly in every particular the author of the crime is found: otherwise, one has laid hands upon an innocent person. It is not sufficient that such and such particulars seem to point to him; it must be all or nothing. This is infallible. Now, in this case, how have I reached the culprit? Through

proceeding by inference from the known to the unknown. I have examined his work; and I have formed an idea of the worker. Reason and logic lead us to what? To a villain, determined, audacious, and prudent, versed in the business. And do you think that such a man would neglect a precaution that would not be omitted by the stupidest tyro? It is inconceivable. What! this man is so skilful as to leave such feeble traces that they escape Gevrol's practised eye, and you think he would risk his safety by leaving an entire night unaccounted for? It's impossible! I am as sure of my system as of a sum that has been proved. The assassin has an alibi. Albert has pleaded none; then he is innocent."

M. Daburon surveyed the detective pityingly, much as he would have looked at a remarkable monomaniac. When the old fellow had finished: "My worthy M. Tabaret," the magistrate said to him: "you have but one fault. You err through an excess of subtlety, accord too freely to others the wonderful sagacity with which you yourself are endowed. Our man has failed in prudence, simply because he believed his rank would place him above suspicion."

"No, sir, no, a thousand times no. My culprit—the true one—he whom we have missed catching, feared everything. Besides, does Albert defend himself? No. He is overwhelmed because he perceives coincidences so fatal that they appear to condemn him, without a chance of escape. Does he try to excuse himself? No. He simply replies: 'It is terrible.' And yet all through his examination I feel reticence that I can not explain."

"I can explain it very easily; and I am as confident as though he had confessed everything. I have more than sufficient proofs for that."

"Ah, sir, proofs! There are always enough of those against an arrested man. They existed against every innocent man who was ever condemned. Proofs! Why, I had them in quantities against Kaiser, the poor little tailor, who—"

"Well," interrupted the magistrate, hastily, "if it is not he, the most interested one, who committed the crime, who then is it? His father, the Comte de Commarin?"

"No; the true assassin is a young man."

M. Daburon had arranged his papers and finished his preparations. He took up his hat, and, as he prepared to leave, replied: "You must then see that I am right! Come, good-by,

M. Tabaret, and make haste and get rid of all your foolish ideas. To-morrow we will talk the whole matter over again. I am rather tired to-night." Then he added, addressing his clerk, "Constant, look in at the record office, in case the prisoner Commarin should wish to speak to me." He moved toward the door; but M. Tabaret barred his exit. "Sir," said the old man, "in the name of heaven, listen to me! He is innocent, I swear to you. Help me, then, to find the real culprit. Sir, think of your remorse should you cause an—" But the magistrate would not hear more. He pushed old Tabaret quickly aside and hurried out. The old man now turned to Constant. He wished to convince him. Lost trouble: the tall clerk hastened to put his things away, thinking of his soup, which was getting cold. So that M. Tabaret soon found himself locked out of the room and alone in the dark passage. All the usual sounds of the Palais had ceased: the place was silent as the tomb. The old detective desperately tore his hair with both hands. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "Albert is innocent; and it is I who have cast suspicion upon him. It is I, fool that I am, who have infused into the obstinate spirit of this magistrate a conviction that I can no longer destroy. He is innocent, and is yet enduring the most horrible anguish. Suppose he should commit suicide! There have been instances of wretched men who, in despair at being falsely accused, have killed themselves in their cells. Poor boy! But I will not abandon him. I have ruined him: I will save him! I must, I will, find the culprit; and he shall pay dearly for my mistake, the scoundrel!"

XIII

AFTER seeing the Comte de Commarin safely in his carriage at the entrance of the Palais de Justice, Noel Gerdy seemed inclined to leave him. Resting one hand against the half-opened carriage door, he bowed respectfully, and said: "When, sir, shall I have the honor of paying my respects to you?"

"Come with me now," said the old nobleman.

The barrister, still leaning forward, muttered some excuses.

He had, he said, important business: he must positively return home at once. "Come," repeated the comte in a tone which admitted of no reply. Noel obeyed. "You have found your father," said M. de Commarin in a low tone; "but I must warn you that at the same time you lose your independence."

The carriage started; and only then did the comte notice that Noel had very modestly seated himself opposite him. This humility seemed to displease him greatly. "Sit here by my side, sir," he exclaimed; "are you not my son?"

The barrister, without replying, took his seat by the side of the terrible old man, but occupied as little room as possible. He had been very much upset by his interview with M. Daburon, for he retained none of his usual assurance, none of that exterior coolness by which he was accustomed to conceal his feelings. Fortunately, the ride gave him time to breathe and to recover himself a little. On the way from the Palais de Justice to the De Commarin mansion not a word passed between the father and son. When the carriage stopped before the steps leading to the principal entrance, and the comte got out with Noel's assistance, there was great commotion among the servants. There were, it is true, few of them present, nearly all having been summoned to the Palais; but the comte and the barrister had scarcely disappeared when, as if by enchantment, they were all assembled in the hall. They came from the garden, the stables, the cellar, and the kitchen. Nearly all bore marks of their calling. A young groom appeared with his wooden shoes filled with straw, shuffling about on the marble floor like a mangy dog on a Gobelin tapestry. One of them recognized Noel as the visitor of the previous Sunday; and that was enough to set fire to all these gossip-mongers thirsting for scandal.

Since morning, moreover, the unusual events at the De Commarin mansion had caused a great stir in society. A thousand stories were circulated, talked over, corrected, and added to by the ill-natured and malicious—some abominably absurd, others simply idiotic. Twenty people, very noble and still more proud, had not been above sending their most intelligent servants to pay a little visit among the comte's retainers, for the sole purpose of learning something positive. As it was, nobody knew anything; and yet everybody pretended to be fully informed. Let any one explain who can this very common phenomenon: A crime is committed; justice arrives, wrapped in

mystery; the police are still ignorant of almost everything; and yet details of the most minute character are already circulated about the streets.

"So," said a cook, "that tall dark fellow with the whiskers is the comte's true son!"—"You are right," said one of the footmen who had accompanied M. de Commarin; "as for the other, he is no more his son than Jean here; who, by the way, will be kicked out of doors if he is caught in this part of the house with his dirty working-shoes on."—"What a romance!" exclaimed Jean, supremely indifferent to the danger which threatened him. "Such things constantly occur in great families," said the cook. "How ever did it happen?"—"Well, you see, one day, long ago, when the comtesse who is now dead was out walking with her little son, who was about six months old, the child was stolen by gipsies. The poor lady was full of grief; but, above all, was greatly afraid of her husband, who was not overkind. What did she do? She purchased a brat from a woman who happened to be passing; and, never having noticed his child, the comte has never known the difference."—"But the assassination!"—"That's very simple. When the woman saw her brat in such a nice berth, she bled him finely, and has kept up a system of blackmailing all along. The vicomte had nothing left for himself. So he resolved at last to put an end to it, and come to a final settling with her."—"And the other, who is up there, the dark fellow?"

The orator would have gone on, without doubt, giving the most satisfactory explanations of everything if he had not been interrupted by the entrance of M. Lubin, who came from the Palais in company of young Joseph. His success, so brilliant up to this time, was cut short, just like that of a second-rate singer when the star of the evening comes on the stage. The entire assembly turned toward Albert's valet, all eyes questioning him. He, of course, knew all; he was the man they wanted. He did not take advantage of his position and keep them waiting.

"What a rascal!" he exclaimed at first. "What a villainous fellow is this Albert!" He entirely did away with the "M." and "Vicomte," and met with general approval for doing so. "However," he added, "I always had my doubts. The fellow didn't please me by half. You see now to what we are exposed every day in our profession, and it is dreadfully disagreeable. The magistrate did not conceal it from me. 'M. Lubin,' said he, 'it is very sad for a man like you to have waited on such

a scoundrel.' For you must know that, besides an old woman over eighty years old, he also assassinated a young girl of twelve. The little child, the magistrate told me, was chopped into bits."

"Ah!" put in Joseph, "he must have been a great fool. Do people do those sort of things themselves when they are rich, and when there are so many poor devils who only ask to gain their living?"

"Pshaw!" said M. Lubin in a knowing tone; "you will see him come out of it as white as snow. These rich men can do anything."

"Anyhow," said the cook, "I'd willingly give a month's wages to be a mouse, and to listen to what the comte and the tall dark fellow are talking about. Suppose some one went up and tried to find out what is going on."

This proposition did not meet with the least favor. The servants knew by experience that, on important occasions, spying was worse than useless. M. de Commarin knew all about servants from infancy. His study was, therefore, a shelter from all indiscretion. The sharpest ear placed at the keyhole could hear nothing of what was going on within, even when the master was in a passion and his voice loudest. One alone, Denis, the comte's valet, had the opportunity of gathering information; but he was well paid to be discreet, and he was so. At this moment M. de Commarin was sitting in the same armchair on which the evening before he had bestowed such furious blows while listening to Albert. As soon as he left his carriage, the old nobleman recovered his haughtiness. He became even more arrogant in his manner than he had been humble when before the magistrate, as though he were ashamed of what he now considered an unpardonable weakness. He wondered how he could have yielded to a momentary impulse, how his grief could have so basely betrayed him. At the remembrance of the avowals wrested from him by a sort of delirium, he blushed and reproached himself bitterly. The same as Albert the night before, Noel, having fully recovered himself, stood erect, cold as marble, respectful, but no longer humble. The father and son exchanged glances which had nothing of sympathy or friendliness. They examined one another, they almost measured each other, much as two adversaries feel their way with their eyes before encountering with their weapons.

"Sir," said the comte at length in a harsh voice, "henceforth this house is yours. From this moment you are the Vicomte de Commarin; you regain possession of all the rights of which you were deprived. Listen before you thank me. I wish, at once, to relieve you of all misunderstanding. Remember this well, sir; had I been master of the situation, I would never have recognized you: Albert should have remained in the position in which I placed him."

"I understand you, sir," replied Noel. "I don't think that I could ever bring myself to do an act like that by which you deprived me of my birthright; but I declare that, if I had the misfortune to do so, I should afterward have acted as you have. Your rank was too conspicuous to permit a voluntary acknowledgment. It was a thousand times better to suffer an injustice to continue in secret than to expose the name to the comments of the malicious."

This answer surprised the comte, and very agreeably too. But he would not let his satisfaction be seen, and it was in a still harsher voice that he resumed. "I have no claim, sir, upon your affection; I do not ask for it, but I insist at all times upon the utmost deference. It is traditional in our house that a son shall never interrupt his father when he is speaking; that you have just been guilty of. Neither do children judge their parents: that also you have just done. When I was forty years of age my father was in his second childhood; but I do not remember ever having raised my voice above his. This said, I continue. I provided the necessary funds for the expenses of Albert's household completely, distinct from my own, for he had his own servants, horses, and carriages; and besides that I allowed the unhappy boy four thousand francs a month. I have decided, in order to put a stop to all foolish gossip, and to make your position the easier, that you should live on a grander scale; this matter concerns myself. Further, I will increase your monthly allowance to six thousand francs, which I trust you will spend as nobly as possible, giving the least possible cause for ridicule. I can not too strongly exhort you to the utmost caution. Keep close watch over yourself. Weigh your words well. Study your slightest actions. You will be the point of observation of the thousands of impertinent idlers who compose our world; your blunders will be their delight. Do you fence?"—"Moderately well."—"That will do! Do you ride?"—"No; but in six months I will be a good horse-

man, or break my neck."—"You must become a horseman, and not break anything. Let us proceed. You will, of course, not occupy Albert's apartments. They will be walled off as soon as I am free of the police. Thank heaven! the house is large. You will occupy the other wing: and there will be a separate entrance to your apartments by another staircase. Servants, horses, carriages, furniture, such as become a vicomte, will be at your service, cost what it may, within forty-eight hours. On the day of your taking possession, you must look as though you had been installed there for years. There will be a great scandal, but that can not be avoided. A prudent father might send you away for a few months to the Austrian or Russian courts, but in this instance such prudence would be absurd. Much better a dreadful outcry, which ends quickly, than low murmurs which last forever. Dare public opinion; and in eight days it will have exhausted its comments, and the story will have become old. So to work! This very evening the workmen shall be here; and, in the first place, I must present you to my servants."

To put his purpose into execution, the comte moved to touch the bell-rope. Noel stopped him. Since the commencement of this interview the barrister had wandered in the regions of the thousand and one nights, the wonderful lamp in his hand. The fairy reality cast into the shade his wildest dreams. He was dazzled by the comte's words, and had need of all his reason to struggle against the giddiness which came over him on realizing his great good fortune. Touched by a magic wand, he seemed to awake to a thousand novel and unknown sensations. He rolled in purple and bathed in gold. But he knew how to appear unmoved. His face had contracted the habit of guarding the secret of the most violent internal excitement. While all his passions vibrated within him, he appeared to listen with a sad and almost indifferent coldness. "Permit me, sir," he said to the comte, "without overstepping the bounds of the utmost respect, to say a few words. I am touched more than I can express by your goodness; and yet I beseech you to delay its manifestation. The proposition I am about to suggest may perhaps appear to you worthy of consideration. It seems to me that the situation demands the greatest delicacy on my part. It is well to despise public opinion, but not to defy it. I am certain to be judged with the utmost severity. If I install myself so suddenly in your house, what will be said? I shall

have the appearance of a conqueror, who thinks little, so long as he succeeds, of passing over the body of the conquered. They will reproach me with occupying the bed still warm from Albert's body. They will jest bitterly at my haste in taking possession. They will certainly compare me to Albert, and the comparison will be to my disadvantage, since I should appear to triumph at a time when a great disaster has fallen upon our house." The comte listened without showing any signs of disapprobation, struck perhaps by the justice of these reasons. Noel imagined that his harshness was much more feigned than real; and this idea encouraged him.

"I beseech you then, sir," he continued, "to permit me for the present in no way to change my mode of living. By not showing myself, I leave all malicious remarks to waste themselves in air—I let public opinion the better familiarize itself with the idea of a coming change. There is a great deal in not taking the world by surprise. Being expected, I shall not have the air of an intruder on presenting myself. Absent, I shall have the advantages which the unknown always possess; I shall obtain the good opinion of all those who have envied Albert; and I shall secure as champions all those who would to-morrow assail me if my elevation came suddenly upon them. Besides, by this delay, I shall accustom myself to my abrupt change of fortune. I ought not to bring into your world, which is now mine, the manners of a parvenu. My name ought not to inconvenience me, like a badly fitting coat."

"Perhaps it would be wisest," murmured the comte.

This assent, so easily obtained, surprised Noel. He got the idea that the comte had only wished to prove him, to tempt him. In any case, whether he had triumphed by his eloquence, or whether he had simply shunned a trap, he had succeeded. His confidence increased; he recovered all his former assurance. "I must add, sir," he continued, "that there are a few matters concerning myself which demand my attention. Before entering upon my new life, I must think of those I am leaving behind me. I have friends and clients. This event has surprised me, just as I am beginning to reap the reward of ten years of hard work and perseverance. I have as yet only sown; I am on the point of reaping. My name is already known; I have obtained some little influence. I confess, without shame, that I have heretofore professed ideas and opinions that would not be suited to this house; and it is impossible in the space of a day—"

"Ah!" interrupted the comte in a bantering tone, "you are a liberal. It is a fashionable disease. Albert also was a great liberal."

"My ideas, sir," said Noel quickly, " were those of every intelligent man who wishes to succeed. Besides, have not all parties one and the same aim—power? They merely take different means of reaching it. I will not enlarge upon this subject. Be assured, sir, that I shall know how to bear my name, and think and act as a man of my rank should."

"I trust so," said M. de Commarin; "and I hope that you will never make me regret Albert."

"At least, sir, it will not be my fault. But since you have mentioned the name of that unfortunate young man, let us occupy ourselves about him."

The comte cast a look of distrust upon Noel. "What can now be done for Albert?" he asked.—"What, sir!" cried Noel with ardor, "would you abandon him when he has not a friend left in the world? He is still your son, sir; he is my brother; for thirty years he has borne the name of Commarin. All the members of a family are jointly liable. Innocent, or guilty, he has a right to count upon us; and we owe him our assistance."

"What do you, then, hope for, sir?" asked the comte.

"To save him if he is innocent; and I love to believe that he is. I am a barrister, sir, and I wish to defend him. I have been told that I have some talent; in such a cause I must have. Yes, however strong the charges against him may be, I will overthrow them. I will dispel all doubts. The truth shall burst forth at the sound of my voice. I will find new accents to imbue the judges with my own conviction. I will save him, and this shall be my last cause."

"And if he should confess," said the comte; "if he has already confessed?"

"Then, sir," replied Noel with a dark look, "I will render him the last service, which in such a misfortune I should ask of a brother; I will procure him the means of avoiding judgment."

"That is well spoken, sir," said the comte; "very well, my son!"

And he held out his hand to Noel, who pressed it, bowing a respectful acknowledgment. The barrister took a long breath. At last he had found the way to this haughty noble's heart; he had conquered, he had pleased him.

"Let us return to yourself, sir," continued the comte. "I yield to the reasons which you have suggested. All shall be done as you desire. But do not consider this a precedent. I never change my plans, even though they are proved to be bad and contrary to my interests. But at least nothing prevents your remaining here from to-day and taking your meals with me. We will, first of all, see where you can be lodged until you formally take possession of the apartments which are to be prepared for you."

Noel had the hardihood to again interrupt the old nobleman. "Sir," said he, "when you bade me follow you here, I obeyed you, as was my duty. Now another and a sacred duty calls me away. Madame Gerdy is at this moment dying. Ought I to leave the deathbed of her who filled my mother's place?"

"Valerie!" murmured the comte. He leaned upon the arm of his chair, his face buried in his hands; in one moment the whole past rose up before him. "She has done me great harm," he murmured, as if answering his thoughts. "She has ruined my whole life; but ought I to be implacable? She is dying from the accusation which is hanging over Albert our son. It was I who was the cause of it all. Doubtless, in this last hour, a word from me would be a great consolation to her. I will accompany you, sir."

Noel started at this unexpected proposal. "Oh, sir!" said he hastily, "spare yourself, pray, a heartrending sight. Your going would be useless. Madame Gerdy exists probably still, but her mind is dead. Her brain was unable to resist so violent a shock. The unfortunate woman would neither recognize nor understand you."

"Go then alone," sighed the comte; "go, my son!"

The words "my son," pronounced with a marked emphasis, sounded like a note of victory in Noel's ears. He bowed to take his leave. The comte motioned him to wait. "In any case," he said, "a place at table will be set for you here. I dine at half-past six precisely. I shall be glad to see you." He rang. His valet appeared. "Denis," said he, "none of the orders I may give will affect this gentleman. You will tell this to all the servants. This gentleman is at home here."

The barrister took his leave; and the comte felt great comfort in being once more alone. Since morning events had followed one another with such bewildering rapidity that his thoughts could scarcely keep pace with them. At last he was able to

reflect. "That, then," said he to himself, "is my legitimate son. I am sure of his birth at any rate. Besides I should be foolish to disown him, for I find him the exact picture of myself at thirty. He is a handsome fellow, Noel, very handsome. His features are decidedly in his favor. He is intelligent and acute. He knows how to be humble without lowering himself, and firm without arrogance. His unexpected good fortune does not turn his head. I augur well of a man who knows how to bear himself in prosperity. He thinks well; he will carry his title proudly. And yet I feel no sympathy with him; it seems to me that I shall always regret my poor Albert. I never knew how to appreciate him. Unhappy boy! To commit such a vile crime! He must have lost his reason. I do not like the look of this one's eye. They say that he is perfect. He expresses, at least, the noblest and most appropriate sentiments. He is gentle and strong, magnanimous, generous, heroic. He is without malice, and is ready to sacrifice himself to repay me for what I have done for him. He forgives Madame Gerdy; he loves Albert. It is enough to make one distrust him. But all young men nowadays are so. Ah! we live in a happy age. Our children are born free from all human shortcomings. They have neither the vices, the passions, nor the tempers of their fathers; and these precocious philosophers, models of sagacity and virtue, are incapable of committing the least folly. Alas! Albert, too, was perfect; and he has assassinated Claudine! What will this one do?— All the same," he added, half-aloud, "I ought to have accompanied him to see Valerie!" And, although the barrister had been gone at least a good ten minutes, M. de Commarin, not realizing how the time had passed, hastened to the window, in the hope of seeing Noel in the courtyard and calling him back.

But Noel was already far away. On leaving the house he took a cab in the Rue de Bourgogne, and was quickly driven to the Rue St. Lazare. On reaching his own door he threw rather than gave five francs to the driver, and ran rapidly up the four flights of stairs. "Who has called to see me?" he asked of the servant.—"No one, sir." He seemed relieved from a great anxiety, and continued in a calmer tone: "And the doctor?"—"He came this morning, sir," replied the girl, "while you were out; and he did not seem at all hopeful. He came again just now, and is still here."—"Very well. I will go and speak to him. If any one calls, show them into my study, and let me know."

On entering Madame Gerdy's chamber, Noel saw at a glance that no change for the better had taken place during his absence. With fixed eyes and convulsed features, the sick woman lay extended upon her back. She seemed dead, save for the sudden starts, which shook her at intervals, and disarranged the bedclothes. Above her head was placed a little vessel, filled with ice-water, which fell drop by drop upon her forehead, covered with large bluish spots. The table and mantelpiece were covered with little pots, medicine bottles, and half-emptied glasses. At the foot of the bed a rag stained with blood showed that the doctor had just had recourse to leeches. Near the fireplace, where was blazing a large fire, a nun of the order of St. Vincent de Paul was kneeling, watching a saucepan. She was a young woman, with a face whiter than her cap. Her immovably placid features, her mournful look, betokened the renunciation of the flesh, and the abdication of all independence of thought. Her heavy gray costume hung about her in large ungraceful folds. Every time she moved, her long chaplet of beads and colored box-wood, loaded with crosses and copper medals, shook and trailed along the floor with a noise like a jingling of chains.

Dr. Herve was seated on a chair opposite the bed, watching, apparently with close attention, the nun's preparations. He jumped up as Noel entered. "At last you are here," he said, giving his friend a strong grasp of the hand.

"I was detained at the Palais," said the barrister, as if he felt the necessity of explaining his absence; "and I have been, as you may well imagine, dreadfully anxious." He leaned toward the doctor's ear, and in a trembling voice asked: "Well, is she at all better?"

The doctor shook his head with an air of deep discouragement. "She is much worse," he replied: "since morning bad symptoms have succeeded each other with frightful rapidity." He checked himself. The barrister had seized his arm and was pressing it with all his might. Madame Gerdy stirred a little, and a feeble groan escaped her. "She heard you," murmured Noel.—"I wish it were so," said the doctor; "it would be most encouraging. But I fear you are mistaken. However, we will see. He went up to Madame Gerdy, and, while feeling her pulse, examined her carefully; then, with the tip of his finger, he lightly raised her eyelid. The eye appeared dull, glassy, lifeless. "Come, judge for yourself; take her hand,

speak to her." Noel, trembling all over, did as his friend wished. He drew near, and, leaning over the bed, so that his mouth almost touched the sick woman's ear, he murmured: "Mother, it is I, Noel, your own Noel. Speak to me, make some sign; do you hear me, mother?" It was in vain; she retained her frightful immobility. Not a sign of intelligence crossed her features. "You see," said the doctor, "I told you the truth."—"Poor woman!" sighed Noel, "does she suffer?"—"Not at present." The nun now rose; and she too came beside the bed. "Doctor," said she, "all is ready."

"Then call the servant, sister, to help us. We are going to apply a mustard poultice." The servant hastened in. In the arms of the two women, Madame Gerdy was like a corpse whom they were dressing for the last time. She was as rigid as though she were dead. She must have suffered much and long, poor woman, for it was pitiable to see how thin she was. The nun herself was affected, although she had become habituated to the sight of suffering. How many invalids had breathed their last in her arms during the fifteen years that she had gone from pillow to pillow! Noel, during this time, had retired into the window recess, and pressed his burning brow against the panes. Of what was he thinking while she who had given him so many proofs of maternal tenderness and devotion was dying a few paces from him? Did he regret her? Was he not thinking rather of the grand and magnificent existence which awaited him on the other side of the river, at the Faubourg St. Germain? He turned abruptly round on hearing his friend's voice.

"It is done," said the doctor; "we have only now to wait the effect of the mustard. If she feels it, it will be a good sign; if it has no effect, we will try cupping."—"And if that does not succeed?" The doctor answered only with a shrug of the shoulders, which showed his inability to do more. "I understand your silence, Herve," murmured Noel. "Alas! you told me last night she was lost."

"Scientifically, yes; but I do not yet despair. It is hardly a year ago that the father-in-law of one of our comrades recovered from an almost identical attack; and I saw him when he was much worse than this: suppuration had set in."

"It breaks my heart to see her in this state," resumed Noel. "Must she die without recovering her reason even for one moment? Will she not recognize me, speak one word to me?"

"Who knows? This disease, my poor friend, baffles all fore-

sight. Each moment the aspect may change, according as the inflammation affects such or such a part of the brain. She is now in a state of utter insensibility, of complete prostration of all her intellectual faculties, of coma, of paralysis, so to say; to-morrow she may be seized with convulsions, accompanied with a fierce delirium."—"And will she speak then?"—"Certainly; but that will neither modify the nature nor the gravity of the disease."—"And will she recover her reason?"—"Perhaps," answered the doctor, looking fixedly at his friend; "but why do you ask that?"

"Ah, my dear Herve, one word from Madame Gerdy, only one, would be of such use to me!"

"For your affair, eh! Well, I can tell you nothing, can promise you nothing. You have as many chances in your favor as against you; only do not leave her. If her intelligence returns, it will be only momentary; try and profit by it. But I must go," added the doctor: "I have still three calls to make."—Noel followed his friend. When they reached the landing, he asked: "You will return?"

"This evening, at nine. There will be no need of me till then. All depends upon the watcher. But I have chosen a pearl. I know her well."—"It was you, then, who brought this nun?"—"Yes, and without your permission. Are you displeased?"—"Not the least in the world. Only I confess."—"What! you make a grimace. Do your political opinions forbid your having your mother, I should say Madame Gerdy, nursed by a nun of St. Vincent?"—"My dear Herve, you."—"Ah! I know what you are going to say. They are adroit, insinuating, dangerous; all that is quite true. If I had a rich old uncle whose heir I expected to be, I shouldn't introduce one of them into his house. These good creatures are sometimes charged with strange commissions. But what have you to fear from this one? Never mind what fools say. Money aside, these worthy sisters are the best nurses in the world. I hope you will have one when your end comes. But good-by; I am in a hurry." And, regardless of his professional dignity, the doctor hurried down the stairs; while Noel, full of thought, his countenance displaying the greatest anxiety, returned to Madame Gerdy. At the door of the sick-room the nun awaited the barrister's return. "Sir," said she, "sir."

"You want something of me, sister?"

"Sir, the servant bade me come to you for money; she has no more, and had to get credit at the chemist's."

"Excuse me, sister," interrupted Noel, seemingly very much vexed; "excuse me for not having anticipated your request; but you see I am rather confused." And, taking a hundred-franc note out of his pocket-book, he laid it on the mantelpiece. "Thanks, sir," said the nun; "I will keep an account of what I spend. We always do that," she added; "it is more convenient for the family. One is so troubled at seeing those one loves laid low by illness. You have perhaps not thought of giving this poor lady the sweet aid of our holy religion! In your place, sir, I should send without delay for a priest—"

"What now, sister? Do you not see the condition she is in? She is the same as dead; you saw that she did not hear my voice."

"That is of little consequence, sir," replied the nun; "you will always have done your duty. She did not answer you; but are you sure that she will not answer the priest? Ah, you do not know all the power of the last sacraments! I have seen the dying recover their intelligence and sufficient strength to confess, and to receive the sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have often heard families say that they do not wish to alarm the invalid, that the sight of the minister of our Lord might inspire a terror that would hasten the final end. It is a fatal error. The priest does not terrify; he reassures the soul, at the beginning of its long journey. He speaks in the name of the God of mercy, who comes to save, not to destroy. I could cite to you many cases of dying people who have been cured simply by contact with the sacred balm."

The nun spoke in a tone as mournful as her look. Her heart was evidently not in the words which she uttered. Without doubt, she had learned them when she first entered the convent. Then they expressed something she really felt, she spoke her own thoughts; but, since then, she had repeated the words over and over again to the friends of every sick person that she attended, until they lost all meaning so far as she was concerned. To utter them became simply a part of her duties as nurse, the same as the preparation of drafts, and the making of poultices. Noel was not listening to her; his thoughts were far away.

"Your dear mother," continued the nun, "this good lady that you love so much, no doubt trusted in her religion. Do you wish to endanger her salvation? If she could speak in the midst of her cruel sufferings—"

The barrister was about to reply, when the servant announced that a gentleman, who would not give his name, wished to speak with him on business. "I will come," he said.

"What do you decide, sir?" persisted the nun.—"I leave you free, sister, to do as you may judge best."

The worthy woman began to recite her lesson of thanks, but to no purpose. Noel had disappeared with a displeased look; and almost immediately she heard his voice in the next room saying: "At last you have come, M. Clergot, I had almost given you up!"

The visitor, whom the barrister had been expecting, is a person well known in the Rue St. Lazare, round about the Rue de Provence, the neighborhood of Notre Dame de Lorette, and all along the exterior Boulevards, from the Chaussee des Martyrs to the Rond-Point of the old Barriere de Clichy. M. Clergot is no more a usurer than M. Jourdain's father was a shopkeeper. Only, as he has lots of money, and is very obliging, he lends it to his friends; and, in return for this kindness, he consents to receive interest, which varies from fifteen to five hundred per cent. The excellent man positively loves his clients, and his honesty is generally appreciated. He has never been known to seize a debtor's goods; he prefers to follow him up without respite for ten years, and tear from him bit by bit what is his due. He lives near the top of the Rue de la Victoire. He has no shop, and yet he sells everything salable, and some other things, too, that the law scarcely considers merchandise. Anything to be useful or neighborly. He often asserts that he is not very rich. It is possibly true. He is whimsical more than covetous, and fearfully bold. Free with his money when one pleases him, he would not lend five francs, even with a mortgage on the Chateau of Ferrieres as guarantee, to whosoever does not meet with his approval. However, he often risks his all on the most unlucky cards. His preferred customers consist of women of doubtful morality, actresses, artists, and those venturesome fellows who enter upon professions which depend solely upon those who practise them, such as lawyers and doctors. He lends to women upon their present beauty, to men upon their future talent. Slight pledges! His discernment, it should be said, however, enjoys a great reputation. It is rarely at fault. A pretty girl furnished by Clergot is sure to go far. For an artist to be in Clergot's debt was a recommendation preferable to the warmest criticism.

Madame Juliette had procured this useful and honorable acquaintance for her lover. Noel, who well knew how sensitive this worthy man was to kind attentions, and how pleased by politeness, began by offering him a seat, and asking after his health. Clergot went into details. His teeth were still good; but his sight was beginning to fail. His legs were no longer so steady, and his hearing was not all that could be desired. The chapter of complaints ended—"You know," said he, "why I have called. Your bills fall due to-day; and I am devilishly in need of money. I have one of ten, one of seven, and a third of five thousand francs, total twenty-two thousand francs."

"Come, M. Clergot," replied Noel, "do not let us have any joking."

"Excuse me," said the usurer; "I am not joking at all."

"I rather think you are though. Why, it's just eight days ago to-day that I wrote to tell you that I was not prepared to meet the bills, and asked for a renewal!"

"I recollect very well receiving your letter."

"What do you say to it, then?"

"By my not answering the note, I supposed that you would understand that I could not comply with your request; I hoped that you would exert yourself to find the amount for me."

Noel allowed a gesture of impatience to escape him. "I have not done so," he said, "so take your own course. I haven't a sou."

"The devil. Do you know that I have renewed these bills four times already?"

"I know that the interest has been fully and promptly paid, and at a rate which can not make you regret the investment." Clergot never likes talking about the interest he receives. He pretends that it is humiliating. "I do not complain; I only say that you take things too easy with me. If I had put your signature in circulation all would have been paid by now."

"Not at all."

"Yes, you would have found means to escape being sued. But you say to yourself: 'Old Clergot is a good fellow.' And that is true. But I am so only when it can do me no harm. Now, to-day, I am absolutely in great need of my money. Ab—so—lute—ly," he added, emphasizing each syllable. The old fellow's decided tone seemed to disturb the barrister. —"Must I repeat it?" Noel said; "I am completely drained, com—plete—ly!"

"Indeed?" said the usurer; "well, I am sorry for you; but I shall have to sue you."

"And what good will that do? Let us play aboveboard, M. Clergot. Do you care to increase the lawyers' fees? You don't, do you? Even though you may put me to great expense, will that procure you even a centime? You will obtain judgment against me. Well, what then? Do you think of putting in an execution? This is not my home; the lease is in Madame Gerdy's name."

"I know all that. Besides, the sale of everything here would not cover the amount."

"Then you intend to put me in prison, at Clichy! Bad speculation, I warn you; my practise will be lost, and, you know, no practise, no money."

"Good!" cried the worthy money-lender. "Now you are talking nonsense! You call that being frank. Pshaw! If you suppose me capable of half the cruel things you have said, my money would be there in your drawer, ready for me."

"A mistake! I should not know where to get it, unless by asking Madame Gerdy, a thing I would never do."

A sarcastic and most irritating little laugh, peculiar to old Clergot, interrupted Noel. "It would be no good doing that," said the usurer; "mama's purse has long been empty; and if the dear creature should die now—they tell me she is very ill—I would not give two hundred napoleons for the inheritance." The barrister turned red with passion, his eyes glittered; but he dissembled, and protested with some spirit. "We know what we know," continued Clergot quietly. "Before a man risks his money, he takes care to make some inquiries. Mama's remaining bonds were sold last October. Ah! the Rue de Provence is an expensive place! I have made an estimate, which is at home. Juliette is a charming woman, to be sure; she has not her equal, I am convinced; but she is expensive, devilish expensive." Noel was enraged at hearing his Juliette thus spoken of by this honorable personage. But what reply could he make? Besides, none of us are perfect; and M. Clergot possesses the fault of not properly appreciating women, which doubtless arises from the business transactions he has had with them. He is charming in his business with the fair sex, complimenting and flattering them; but the coarsest insults would be less revolting than his disgusting familiarity.

"You have gone too fast," he continued, without deigning to

notice his client's ill looks; "and I have told you so before. But, you would not listen; you are mad about the girl. You can never refuse her anything. Fool! When a pretty girl wants anything, you should let her long for it for a while; she has then something to occupy her mind and keep her from thinking of a quantity of other follies. Four good strong wishes, well managed, ought to last a year. You don't know how to look after your own interests. I know that her glance would turn the head of a stone saint; but you should reason with yourself, hang it! Why, there are not ten girls in Paris who live in such style! And do you think she loves you any the more for it? Not a bit. When she has ruined you, she'll leave you in the lurch." Noel accepted the eloquence of his prudent banker as a man without an umbrella accepts a shower. "What is the meaning of all this?" he asked.—"Simply that I will not renew your bills. You understand? Just now, if you try very hard, you will be able to hand me the twenty-two thousand francs in question. You need not frown; you will find means to do so to prevent my seizing your goods—not here, for that would be absurd, but at your little woman's apartments. She would not be at all pleased, and would not hesitate to tell you so."

"But everything there belongs to her; and you have no right—"

"What of that? She will oppose the seizure, no doubt, and I expect her to do so; but she will make you find the requisite sum. Believe me, you had best parry the blow. I insist on being paid now. I won't give you any further delay; because, in three months' time, you will have used your last resources. It is no use saying 'No,' like that. You are in one of those conditions that must be continued at any price. You would burn the wood from your dying mother's bed to warm this creature's feet. Where did you obtain the ten thousand francs that you left with her the other evening? Who knows what you will next attempt to procure money? The idea of keeping her fifteen days, three days, a single day more, may lead you far. Open your eyes. I know the game well. If you do not leave Juliette, you are lost. Listen to a little good advice, gratis. You must give her up, sooner or later, musn't you? Do it to-day, then."

As you see, our worthy Clergot never minces the truth to his customers, when they do not keep their engagements.

If they are displeased, so much the worse for them! His conscience is at rest. He would never join in any foolish business. Noel could bear it no longer; and his anger burst forth. "Enough," he cried decidedly. "Do as you please, M. Clergot, but have done with your advice. I prefer the lawyer's plain prose. If I have committed follies, I can repair them, and in a way that would surprise you. Yes, M. Clergot, I can procure twenty-two thousand francs; I could have a hundred thousand to-morrow morning, if I saw fit. They would only cost me the trouble of asking for them. But that I will not do. My extravagance, with all due deference to you, will remain a secret as heretofore. I do not choose that my present embarrassed circumstances should be even suspected. I will not relinquish, for your sake, that at which I have been aiming, the very day it is within my grasp."

"He resists," thought the usurer; "he is less deeply involved than I imagined."

"So," continued the barrister, "put your bills in the hands of your lawyer. Let him sue me. In eight days I shall be summoned to appear before the Tribunal de Commerce, and I shall ask for the twenty-five days' delay, which the judges always grant to an embarrassed debtor. Twenty-five and eight, all the world over, make just thirty-three days. That is precisely the respite I need. You have two alternatives: either accept from me at once a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs, payable in six weeks, or else, as I have an appointment, go off to your lawyer."

"And in six weeks," replied the usurer, "you will be in precisely the same condition you are to-day. And forty-five days more of Juliette will cost—"

"M. Clergot," interrupted Noel, "long before that time my position will be completely changed. But I have finished," he added, rising, "and my time is valuable."

"One moment, you impatient fellow!" exclaimed the banker, "you said twenty-four thousand francs at forty-five days?"

"Yes. That is about seventy-five per cent—pretty fair interest."

"I never cavil about interest," said M. Clergot; "only—" He looked slyly at Noel, scratching his chin violently, a movement which in him indicated how insensibly his brain was at work. "Only," he continued, "I should very much like to know what you are counting upon."

"That I will not tell you. You will know it ere long, in common with all the world."

"I have it!" cried M. Clergot, "I have it! You are going to marry! You have found an heiress, of course; your little Juliette told me something of the sort this morning. Ah! you are going to marry! Is she pretty? But no matter. She has a full purse, eh? You wouldn't take her without that. So you are going to start a home of your own?"

"I did not say so."

"That's right. Be discreet. But I can take a hint. One word more. Beware of the storm; your little woman has a suspicion of the truth. You are right; it wouldn't do to be seeking money now. The slightest inquiry would be sufficient to enlighten your father-in-law as to your financial position, and you would lose the damsel. Marry and settle down. But get rid of Juliette, or I won't give five francs for the fortune. So it is settled: prepare a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs, and I will call for it when I bring you the old ones on Monday."

"You haven't them with you, then?"

"No. And to be frank, I confess that, knowing well I should get nothing from you, I left them with others at my lawyer's. However, you may rest easy: you have my word."

M. Clergot made a pretense of retiring; but just as he was going out, he returned quickly. "I had almost forgotten," said he; "while you are about it, you can make the bill for twenty-six thousand francs. Your little woman ordered some dresses, which I shall deliver to-morrow; in this way they will be paid for." The barrister began to remonstrate. He certainly did not refuse to pay, only he thought he ought to be consulted when any purchases were made. He didn't like this way of disposing of his money.

"What a fellow!" said the usurer, shrugging his shoulders; "do you want to make the girl unhappy for nothing at all? She won't let you off yet, my friend. You may be quite sure she will eat up your new fortune also. And you know, if you need any money for the wedding, you have but to give me some guarantee. Procure me an introduction to the notary, and everything shall be arranged. But I must go. On Monday then."

Noel listened, to make sure that the usurer had actually gone. When he heard him descending the staircase, "Scoundrel!" he

cried, "miserable thieving old skinflint! Didn't he need a lot of persuading? He had quite made up his mind to sue me. It would have been a pleasant thing had the comte come to hear of it. Vile usurer! I was afraid one moment of being obliged to tell him all."

While inveighing thus against the money-lender, the barrister looked at his watch. "Half-past five already," he said. His indecision was great. Ought he to go and dine with his father? Could he leave Madame Gerdy? He longed to dine at the De Commarin mansion; yet, on the other hand, to leave a dying woman! "Decidedly," he murmured, "I can't go." He sat down at his desk, and with all haste wrote a letter of apology to his father. Madame Gerdy, he said, might die at any moment; he must remain with her. As he bade the servant give the note to a messenger, to carry it to the comte, a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Does madame's brother," he asked, "know that she is dangerously ill?"

"I do not know, sir," replied the servant, "at any rate, I have not informed him."

"What, did you not think to send him word? Run to his house quickly. Have him sought for, if he is not at home; he must come." Considerably more at ease, Noel went and sat in the sick-room. The lamp was lighted; and the nun was moving about the room as though quite at home, dusting and arranging everything, and putting it in its place. She wore an air of satisfaction that Noel did not fail to notice. "Have we any gleam of hope, sister?" he asked.

"Perhaps," replied the nun. "The priest has been here, sir; your dear mother did not notice his presence; but he is coming back. That is not all. Since the priest was here, the poultice has taken admirably. The skin is quite reddened. I am sure she feels it."

"God grant that she does, sister!"

"Oh, I have already been praying! But it is important not to leave her alone a minute. I have arranged all with the servant. After the doctor has been here, I shall lie down, and she will watch until one in the morning. I will then take her place and—"

"You shall go to bed, sister," interrupted Noel, sadly. "It is I, who could not sleep a wink, who will watch through the night."

OLD TABARET did not consider himself defeated, because he had been repulsed by the investigating magistrate, already irritated by a long day's examination. You may call it a fault, or an accomplishment; but the old man was more obstinate than a mule. To the excess of despair to which he succumbed in the passage outside the magistrate's office, there soon succeeded that firm resolution which is the enthusiasm called forth by danger. The feeling of duty got the upper hand. Was it a time to yield to unworthy despair, when the life of a fellow man depended on each minute? Inaction would be unpardonable. He had plunged an innocent man into the abyss; and he must draw him out, he alone, if no one would help him. Old Tabaret, as well as the magistrate, was greatly fatigued. On reaching the open air, he perceived that he, too, was in want of food. The emotions of the day had prevented him from feeling hungry; and, since the previous evening, he had not even taken a glass of water. He entered a restaurant on the Boulevard, and ordered dinner. While eating, not only his courage, but also his confidence, came insensibly back to him. It was with him, as with the rest of mankind; who knows how much one's ideas may change, from the beginning to the end of a repast, be it ever so modest! A philosopher has plainly demonstrated that heroism is but an affair of the stomach. The old fellow looked at the situation in a much less sombre light. He had plenty of time before him! A clever man could accomplish a great deal in a month! Would his usual penetration fail him now? Certainly not. His great regret was his inability to let Albert know that some one was working for him.

He was entirely another man as he rose from the table; and it was with a sprightly step that he walked toward the Rue St. Lazare. Nine o'clock struck as the concierge opened the door for him. He went at once up to the fourth floor to inquire after the health of his former friend, her whom he used to call the excellent, the worthy Madame Gerdy. It was Noel who let

him in, Noel, who had doubtless been thinking of the past, for he looked as sad as though the dying woman were really his mother. In consequence of this unexpected circumstance, old Tabaret could not avoid going in for a few minutes, though he would much have preferred not doing so. He knew very well that, being with the barrister, he would be unavoidably led to speak of the Lerouge case; and how could he do this, knowing, as he did, the particulars much better than his young friend himself, without betraying his secret? A single imprudent word might reveal the part he was playing in this sad drama. It was, above all others, from his dear Noel, now Vicomte de Commarin, that he wished entirely to conceal his connection with the police. But, on the other hand, he thirsted to know what had passed between the barrister and the comte. His ignorance on this single point aroused his curiosity. However, as he could not withdraw, he resolved to keep close watch upon his language and remain constantly on his guard. The barrister ushered the old man into Madame Gerdy's room. Her condition, since the afternoon, had changed a little; though it was impossible to say whether for the better or the worse. One thing was evident, her prostration was not so great. Her eyes still remained closed; but a slight quivering of the lids was evident. She constantly moved on her pillow, and moaned feebly.

"What does the doctor say?" asked old Tabaret, in that low voice one unconsciously employs in a sick-room.

"He has just gone," replied Noel; "before long all will be over." The old man advanced on tiptoe, and looked at the dying woman with evident emotion. "Poor creature!" he murmured; "God is merciful in taking her. She perhaps suffers much; but what is this pain compared to what she would feel if she knew that her son, her true son, was in prison, accused of murder?"

"That is what I keep thinking," said Noel, "to console myself for this sight. For I still love her, my old friend; I shall always regard her as a mother. You have heard me curse her, have you not? I have twice treated her very harshly. I thought I hated her; but now, at the moment of losing her, I forget every wrong she has done me, only to remember her tenderness. Yes, for her, death is far preferable! And yet I do not think, no, I can not think her son guilty."

"No! what, you too?" Old Tabaret put so much warmth and vivacity into this exclamation that Noel looked at him with

astonishment. He felt his face grow red, and he hastened to explain himself. "I said, 'You too,'" he continued, "because I, thanks perhaps to my inexperience, am persuaded also of this young man's innocence. I can not in the least imagine a man of his rank meditating and accomplishing so cowardly a crime. I have spoken with many persons on this matter which has made so much noise; and everybody is of my opinion. He has public opinion in his favor; that is already something."

Seated near the bed, sufficiently far from the lamp to be in the shade, the nun hastily knitted stockings destined for the poor. It was a purely mechanical work, during which she usually prayed. But, since old Tabaret entered the room, she forgot her everlasting prayers while listening to the conversation. What did it all mean? Who could this woman be? And this young man who was not her son, and who yet called her mother, and at the same time spoke of a true son accused of being an assassin? Before this she had overheard mysterious remarks pass between Noel and the doctor. Into what strange house had she entered? She was a little afraid; and her conscience was sorely troubled. Was she not sinning? She resolved to tell all to the priest, when he returned.

"No," said Noel, "no, M. Tabaret; Albert has not public opinion for him. We are sharper than that in France, as you know. When a poor devil is arrested, entirely innocent, perhaps, of a crime charged against him, we are always ready to throw stones at him. We keep all our pity for him, who, without doubt guilty, appears before the court of assize. As long as justice hesitates, we side with the prosecution against the prisoner. The moment it is proved that the man is a villain, all our sympathies are in his favor. That is public opinion. You understand, however, that it affects me but little. I despise it to such an extent that if, as I dare still hope, Albert is not released, I will defend him. Yes, I have told the Comte de Commarin, my father, as much. I will be his counsel, and I will save him."

Gladly would the old man have thrown himself on Noel's neck. He longed to say to him: "We will save him together." But he restrained himself. Would not the barrister despise him, if he told him his secret! He resolved, however, to reveal all should it become necessary, or should Albert's position become worse. For the time being, he contended himself with strongly approving his young friend. "Bravo! my boy," said

he; "you have a noble heart. I feared to see you spoiled by wealth and rank; pardon me. You will remain, I see, what you have always been in your more humble position. But, tell me, you have, then, seen your father, the comte?"

Now, for the first time, Noel seemed to notice the nun's eyes, which, lighted by eager curiosity, glittered in the shadow like carbuncles. With a look, he drew the old man's attention to her, and said: "I have seen him; and everything is arranged to my satisfaction. I will tell you all, in detail, by and by, when we are more at ease. By this bedside, I am almost ashamed of my happiness."

M. Tabaret was obliged to content himself with this reply and this promise. Seeing that he would learn nothing that evening, he spoke of going to bed, declaring himself tired out by what he had had to do during the day. Noel did not ask him to stop. He was expecting, he said, Madame Gerdy's brother, who had been sent for several times, but who was not at home. He hardly knew how he could again meet this brother, he added: he did not yet know what conduct he ought to pursue. Should he tell him all? It would only increase his grief. On the other hand, silence would oblige him to play a difficult part. The old man advised him to say nothing; he could explain all later on. "What a fine fellow Noel is!" murmured old Tabaret, as he regained his apartments as quietly as possible. He had been absent from home twenty-four hours; and he fully expected a formidable scene with his housekeeper. Manette was decidedly out of temper, and declared, once for all, that she would certainly seek a new place, if her master did not change his conduct. She had remained up all night, in a terrible fright, listening to the least sound on the stairs, expecting every moment to see her master brought home on a litter, assassinated. As though on purpose, there had been great commotion in the house. M. Gerdy had gone down a short time after her master, and she had seen him return two hours later. After that, they had sent for the doctor. Such goings on would be the death of her, without counting that her constitution was too weak to allow her to sit up so late. But Manette forgot that she did not sit up on her master's account nor on Noel's, but was expecting one of her old friends, one of those handsome Gardes de Paris who had promised to marry her, and for whom she had waited in vain, the rascal! She burst forth in reproaches, while she prepared her master's

bed, too sincere, she declared, to keep anything on her mind, or to keep her mouth closed, when it was a question of his health and reputation. M. Tabaret made no reply, not being in the mood for argument. He bent his head to the storm, and turned his back to the hail. But, as soon as Manette had finished what she was about, he put her out of the room, and double locked the door. He busied himself in forming a new line of battle, and in deciding upon prompt and active measures. He rapidly examined the situation. Had he been deceived in his investigations? No. Were his calculations of probabilities erroneous? No. He had started with a positive fact, the murder. He had discovered the particulars; his inferences were correct, and the criminal was evidently such as he had described him. The man M. Daburon had had arrested could not be the criminal. His confidence in a judicial axiom had led him astray, when he pointed to Albert.

"That," thought he, "is the result of following accepted opinions and those absurd phrases, all ready to hand, which are like milestones along a fool's road! Left free to my own inspirations, I should have examined this case more thoroughly, I would have left nothing to chance. The formula, 'Seek out the one whom the crime benefits,' may often be as absurd as true. The heirs of a man assassinated are in reality all benefited by the murder; while the assassin obtains at most the victim's watch and purse. Three persons were interested in Widow Lerouge's death: Albert, Madame Gerdy, and the Comte de Commarin. It is plain to me that Albert is not the criminal. It is not Madame Gerdy, who is dying from the shock caused by the unexpected announcement of the crime. There remains, then, the comte. Can it be he? If so, he certainly did not do it himself. He must have hired some wretch, a wretch of good position, if you please, wearing patent-leather boots of a good make, and smoking trabucos cigars with an amber mouthpiece. These well-dressed villains ordinarily lack nerve. They cheat, they forge; but they don't assassinate. Supposing, though, that the comte did get hold of some dare-devil fellow. He would simply have replaced one accomplice by another still more dangerous. That would be idiotic, and the comte is a sensible man. He, therefore, had nothing whatever to do with the matter. To be quite sure though, I will make some inquiries about him. Another thing, Widow Lerouge, who so readily exchanged the children while nursing them, would be very likely to undertake

a number of other dangerous commissions. Who can say that she has not obliged other persons who had an equal interest in getting rid of her? There is a secret, I am getting at it, but I do not hold it yet. One thing is certain though, she was not assassinated to prevent Noel recovering his rights. She must have been suppressed for some analogous reason, by a bold and experienced scoundrel, prompted by similar motives to those of which I suspected Albert. It is, then, in that direction that I must follow up the case now. And, above all, I must obtain the past history of this obliging widow, and I will have it too, for in all probability the particulars which have been written for from her birthplace will arrive to-morrow."

Returning to Albert, old Tabaret weighed the charges which were brought against the young man, and reckoned the chances which he still had in favor of his release. "From the look of things," he murmured, "I see only luck and myself, that is to say, absolutely nothing, in his favor at present. As to the charges, they are countless. However, it is no use going over them. It is I who amassed them; and I know what they are worth! At once everything and nothing. What do signs prove, however striking they may be, in cases where one ought to disbelieve even the evidence of one's own senses? Albert is a victim of the most remarkable coincidences; but one word might explain them. There have been many such cases. It was even worse in the matter of the little tailor. At five o'clock, he bought a knife, which he showed to ten of his friends, saying: 'This is for my wife, who is an idle jade, and plays me false with my workmen.' In the evening, the neighbors heard a terrible quarrel between the couple, cries, threats, stampings, blows; then suddenly all was quiet. The next day, the tailor had disappeared from his home, and the wife was discovered dead, with the very same knife buried to the hilt between her shoulders. Ah, well! it turned out it was not the husband who had stuck it there; it was a jealous lover. After that, what is to be believed? Albert, it is true, will not give an account of how he passed Tuesday evening. That does not affect me. The question for me is not to prove where he was, but that he was not at La Jonchere. Perhaps, after all, Gevrol is on the right track. I hope so, from the bottom of my heart. Yes; God grant that he may be successful. My vanity and my mad presumption will deserve the slight punishment of his triumph over me. What would I not give to establish this man's inno-

cence? Half of my fortune would be but a small sacrifice. If I should not succeed! If, after having caused the evil, I should find myself powerless to undo it!"

Old Tabaret went to bed, shuddering at this last thought. He fell asleep, and had a terrible nightmare. Lost in that vulgar crowd, which, on the days when society revenges itself, presses about the Place de la Roquette and watches the last convulsions of one condemned to death, he attended Albert's execution. He saw the unhappy man, his hands bound behind his back, his collar turned down, ascend, supported by a priest, the steep flight of steps leading on to the scaffold. He saw him standing upon the fatal platform, turning his proud gaze upon the terrified assembly beneath him. Soon the eyes of the condemned man met his own; and, bursting his cords, he pointed him, Tabaret, out to the crowd, crying, in a loud voice: "That man is my assassin." Then a great clamor arose to curse the detective. He wished to escape; but his feet seemed fixed to the ground. He tried at least to close his eyes; he could not. A power unknown and irresistible compelled him to look. Then Albert again cried out: "I am innocent; the guilty one is—" He pronounced a name; the crowd repeated this name, and he alone did not catch what it was. At last the head of the condemned man fell. M. Tabaret uttered a loud cry, and awoke in a cold perspiration. It took him some time to convince himself that nothing was real of what he had just heard and seen, and that he was actually in his own house, in his own bed. It was only a dream! But dreams sometimes are, they say, warnings from heaven. His imagination was so struck with what had just happened that he made unheard-of efforts to recall the name pronounced by Albert. Not succeeding, he got up and lighted his candle. The darkness made him afraid, the night was full of fantoms. It was no longer with him a question of sleep. Beset with these anxieties, he accused himself most severely, and harshly reproached himself for the occupation he had until then so delighted in. Poor humanity! He was evidently stark mad the day when he first had the idea of seeking employment in the Rue de Jerusalem. A noble hobby, truly, for a man of his age, a good quiet citizen of Paris, rich, and esteemed by all! And to think that he had been proud of his exploits, that he had boasted of his cunning, that he had plumed himself on his keenness of scent, that he had been flattered by that ridiculous sobriquet, "Tirauclair." Old fool!

What could he hope to gain from that bloodhound calling? All sorts of annoyance, the contempt of the world, without counting the danger of contributing to the conviction of an innocent man. Why had he not taken warning by the little tailor's case? Recalling his few satisfactions of the past, and comparing them with his present anguish, he resolved that he would have no more to do with it. Albert once saved, he would seek some less dangerous amusement, and one more generally appreciated. He would break the connection of which he was ashamed, and the police and justice might get on the best they could without him.

At last the day, which he had awaited with feverish impatience, dawned. To pass the time, he dressed himself slowly, with much care, trying to occupy his mind with needless details, and to deceive himself as to the time by looking constantly at the clock, to see if it had not stopped. In spite of all this delay, it was not eight o'clock when he presented himself at the magistrate's house, begging him to excuse, on account of the importance of his business, a visit too early not to be indiscreet. Excuses were superfluous. M. Daburon was never disturbed by a call at eight o'clock in the morning. He was already at work. He received the old amateur detective with his usual kindness, and even joked with him a little about his excitement of the previous evening. Who would have thought his nerves were so sensitive? Doubtless the night had brought deliberation. Had he recovered his reason? or had he put his hand on the true criminal?

This trifling tone in a magistrate, who was accused of being grave even to a fault, troubled the old man. Did not this quizzing hide a determination not to be influenced by anything that he could say? He believed it did; and it was without the least deception that he commenced his pleading. He put the case more calmly this time, but with all the energy of a well-digested conviction. He had appealed to the heart, he now appealed to reason; but, although doubt is essentially contagious, he neither succeeded in convincing the magistrate, nor in shaking his opinion. His strongest arguments were of no more avail against M. Daburon's absolute conviction than bullets made of bread crumbs would be against a breastplate. And there was nothing very surprising in that. Old Tabaret had on his side only a subtle theory, mere words; M. Daburon possessed palpable testimony, facts. And such was the peculiarity of the case that all the reasons brought forward by the old man to justify Albert

simply reacted against him, and confirmed his guilt. A repulse at the magistrate's hands had entered too much into M. Tabaret's anticipations for him to appear troubled or discouraged. He declared that, for the present, he would insist no more; he had full confidence in the magistrate's wisdom and impartiality. All he wished was to put him on his guard against the presumptions which he himself unfortunately had taken such pains to inspire. He was going, he added, to busy himself with obtaining more information. They were only at the beginning of the investigation; and they were still ignorant of very many things, even of Widow Lerouge's past life. More facts might come to light. Who knew what testimony the man with the earrings, who was being pursued by Gevrol, might give? Though in a great rage internally, and longing to insult and chastise him whom he inwardly styled a "fool of a magistrate," old Tabaret forced himself to be humble and polite. He wished, he said, to keep well posted up in the different phases of the investigation, and to be informed of the result of future interrogations. He ended by asking permission to communicate with Albert. He thought his services deserved this slight favor. He desired an interview of only ten minutes without witnesses. M. Daburon refused this request. "Your refusal is cruel, sir," said M. Tabaret; "but I understand it, and submit." That was his only complaint; and he withdrew almost immediately, fearing that he could no longer master his indignation. "Three or four days," he muttered, "that is the same as three or four years to the unfortunate prisoner. But I must find out the real truth of the case between now and then."

Yes, M. Daburon only required three or four days to wring a confession from Albert, or at least to make him abandon his system of defense. The difficulty of the prosecution was not being able to produce any witness who had seen the prisoner during the evening of Shrove Tuesday. It was only Saturday, the day of the murder was remarkable enough to fix people's memories, and up till then there had not been time to start a proper investigation. He arranged for five of the most experienced detectives in the secret service to be sent to Bougival, supplied with photographs of the prisoner. They were to scour the entire country between Rueil and La Jonchere, to inquire everywhere, and make the most minute investigations. The photographs would greatly aid their efforts. It was impossible that, on an evening when so many people were about, no one

had noticed the original of the portrait either at the railway station at Rueil or upon one of the roads which lead to La Jonchere, the highroad, and the path by the river. These arrangements made, the investigating magistrate proceeded to the Palais de Justice, and sent for Albert. He had already in the morning received a report, informing him hour by hour of the acts, gestures, and utterances of the prisoner, who had been carefully watched. Nothing in him, the report said, betrayed the criminal. He seemed very sad, but not despairing. After eating lightly, he had gone to the window of his cell, and had there remained standing for more than an hour. Then he had lain down, and quietly gone to sleep. "What an iron constitution!" thought M. Daburon, when the prisoner entered his office.

Albert was no longer the despairing man who, the night before, bewildered with the multiplicity of charges, surprised by the rapidity with which they were brought against him, had writhed beneath the magistrate's gaze, and appeared ready to succumb. Innocent or guilty, he had made up his mind how to act; his face left no doubt of that. On beholding him, the magistrate understood that he would have to change his mode of attack. He therefore gave up his former tactics, and attempted to move him by kindness. It was a hackneyed trick, but almost always successful, like certain pathetic scenes at theatres. Now M. Daburon excelled in producing affecting scenes. No one knew so well as he how to touch those old chords which vibrate still even in the most corrupt hearts: honor, love, and family ties. With Albert, he became kind and friendly, and full of the liveliest compassion. Unfortunate man! how greatly he must suffer, he whose whole life had been like one long enchantment. Recalling the past, the magistrate pictured to him the most touching reminiscences of his early youth, and stirred up the ashes of all his extinct affections. Taking advantage of all that he knew of the prisoner's life, he tortured him by the most mournful allusions to Claire. Why did he persist in bearing alone his great misfortune? Why this morose silence? Should he not rather hasten to reassure her whose very life depended upon his? What was necessary for that? A single word. Then he would be, if not free, at least returned to the world.

It was no longer the magistrate who spoke; it was a father. For a moment he imagined himself in Albert's position. What would he have done after the terrible revelation? He scarcely dared ask himself. He understood the motive which prompted

the murder of Widow Lerouge; he could explain it to himself; he could almost excuse it. (Another trap.) It was certainly a great crime, but in no way revolting to conscience or to reason. Besides, was not the Comte de Commarin the more guilty of the two? Was it not his folly that prepared the way for this terrible event? His son was the victim of fatality, and was greatly to be pitied. But he wasted his eloquence precisely as M. Tabaret had wasted his. Albert appeared in no way affected.

One test, which has often given the desired result, still remained to be tried. On this same day, Saturday, Albert was confronted with the corpse of Widow Lerouge. He appeared impressed by the sad sight, but no more than any one would be, if forced to look at the victim of an assassination four days after the crime. One of the bystanders having exclaimed: "Ah, if she could but speak!" he replied: "That would be very fortunate for me." Since morning, M. Daburon had not gained the least advantage. He had had to acknowledge the failure of his maneuvres; and now this last attempt had not succeeded either. His spite was evident to all, when, suddenly ceasing his wheedling, he harshly gave the order to reconduct the prisoner to his cell. "I will compel him to confess!" he muttered between his teeth. Had Albert confessed his guilt, he would have found M. Daburon disposed to pity him; but as he denied it, he opposed himself to an implacable enemy.

Having previously wished Albert innocent, he now absolutely longed to prove him guilty, and that for a hundred reasons which he was unable to analyze. He remembered, too well, his having had the Vicomte de Commarin for a rival, and his having nearly assassinated him. Had he not repented even to remorse his having signed the warrant of arrest, and his having accepted the duty of investigating the case. Old Tabaret's incomprehensible change of opinion troubled him, too. It was now less the proofs of Albert's guilt which he sought for than the justification of his own conduct as magistrate.

M. Daburon passed all Sunday in listening to the reports of the detectives he had sent to Bougival. They had spared no trouble, they stated, but they could report nothing new. They had heard many people speak of a woman, who pretended, they said, to have seen the assassin leave Widow Lerouge's cottage; but no one had been able to point this woman out to them, or even to give them her name. They all thought it their duty, however, to inform the magistrate that another inquiry was

going on at the same time as theirs. It was directed by M. Tabaret, who personally scoured the country round about in a cabriolet drawn by a very swift horse. He appeared to have under his orders a dozen men, four of whom at least certainly belonged to the Rue de Jerusalem. All the detectives had met him; and he had spoken to them. To one, he had said: "What the deuce are you showing this photograph for? In less than no time you will have a crowd of witnesses, who, to earn three francs, will describe some one more like the portrait than the portrait itself." He had met another on the highroad, and had laughed at him. "You are a simple fellow," he cried out, "to hunt for a hiding man on the highway; look a little aside, and you may find him." Again he had accosted two who were together in a cafe at Bougival, and had taken them aside. "I have him," he said to them. "He is a smart fellow; he came by Chatou. Three people have seen him—two railway porters and a third person whose testimony will be decisive, for she spoke to him. He was smoking."

M. Daburon became so angry with old Tabaret that he immediately started for Bougival, firmly resolved to bring the too zealous man back to Paris, and to report his conduct in the proper quarter. The journey, however, was useless. M. Tabaret, the cabriolet, the swift horse, and the twelve men had all disappeared. On returning home, greatly fatigued, and very much out of temper, the investigating magistrate found the following telegram from the chief of the detective force awaiting him; it was brief, but to the point:

"ROUEN, Sunday.—"The man is found. This evening we start for Paris. The most valuable testimony. GEVROL."

XV

ON Monday morning, at nine o'clock, M. Daburon was preparing to start for the Palais de Justice, where he expected to find Gevrol and his man, and perhaps old Tabaret. His preparations were nearly made, when his servant announced that a young lady, accompanied by another considerably older,

asked to speak with him. She declined giving her name, saying, however, that she would not refuse it, if it was absolutely necessary in order to be received. "Show them in," said the magistrate. He thought it must be a relation of one or other of the prisoners, whose case he had had in hand when this fresh crime occurred. At the sound of the opening of the door he cast a careless glance in the mirror. But he immediately started with a movement of dismay, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Claire!" he stammered, "Claire!"

And as if he feared equally either being deceived by an illusion, or actually seeing her whose name he had uttered, he turned slowly round. It was truly Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Never, even in the time when a sight of her was his greatest happiness, had she appeared to him more fascinating. In her eyes, rendered more brilliant by recent tears but partly wiped away, shone the noblest resolution.

She advanced calm and dignified, and held out her hand to the magistrate in that English style that some ladies can render so gracefully. "We are always friends, are we not?" asked she, with a sad smile. The magistrate did not dare take the ungloved hand she held out to him. He scarcely touched it with the tips of his fingers, as though he feared too great an emotion. "Yes," he replied indistinctly, "I am always devoted to you."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange sat down in the large armchair, where, two nights previously, old Tabaret had planned Albert's arrest. M. Daburon remained standing, leaning against his writing-table. "You know why I have come?" asked the young girl. With a nod, he replied in the affirmative. "I only knew of this dreadful event yesterday," pursued Claire; "my grandmother considered it best to hide it from me, and, but for my devoted Schmidt, I should still be ignorant of it all. What a night I have passed! At first I was terrified; but, when they told me that all depended upon you, my fears were dispelled. It is for my sake, is it not, that you have undertaken this investigation? Oh, you are good, I know it! How can I ever express my gratitude?" What humiliation for the worthy magistrate were these heartfelt thanks! Yes, he had at first thought of Mademoiselle d'Arlange, but since— He bowed his head to avoid Claire's glance, so pure and so daring. "Do not thank me, mademoiselle," he stammered, "I have not the claim that you think upon your gratitude."

Claire had been too troubled herself, at first, to notice the magistrate's agitation. The trembling of his voice attracted her attention; but she did not suspect the cause. "And yet, sir," she continued, "I thank you all the same. I might never have dared go to another magistrate, to speak to a stranger! Besides, what value would another attach to my words, not knowing me? While you, so generous, will reassure me, will tell me by what awful mistake he has been arrested like a villain and thrown into prison."—"Alas!" sighed the magistrate, so low that Claire scarcely heard him, and did not understand the terrible meaning of the exclamation.—"With you," she continued, "I am not afraid. You are my friend, you told me so; you will not refuse my prayers. Give him his liberty quickly. I do not know exactly of what he is accused, but I swear to you that he is innocent."

Claire spoke in the positive manner of one who saw no obstacle in the way of the very simple and natural desire which she had expressed. The magistrate was silent. He was really an upright man, as good as the best, as is proved from the fact that he trembled at the moment of unveiling the fatal truth. He hesitated to pronounce the words which, like a whirlwind, would overturn the fragile edifice of this young girl's happiness.

"And if I should tell you, mademoiselle," he commenced, "that M. Albert is not innocent?" She half-raised herself with a protesting gesture. He continued: "If I should tell you that he is guilty?"—"Oh, sir!" interrupted Claire, "you can not think so!"—"I do think so, mademoiselle," exclaimed the magistrate in a sad voice, "and I must add that I am morally certain of it."—Claire looked at the investigating magistrate with profound amazement. Had she heard him aright? Did she understand? She was far from sure. Was he not deluding her by a cruel, unworthy jest?

Not daring to raise his eyes, he continued in a tone, expressive of the sincerest pity: "I suffer cruelly for you at this moment, mademoiselle; but I have the sad courage to tell you the truth, and you must summon yours to hear it. It is far better that you should know everything from the mouth of a friend. Summon, then, all your fortitude; strengthen your noble soul against a most dreadful misfortune. No, there is no mistake. Justice has not been deceived. The Vicomte de Commarin is accused of an assassination; and everything, you understand me, proves that he committed it." M. Daburon pronounced this

last sentence slowly, word by word. He expected a burst of despair, tears, distressing cries. She might perhaps faint away; and he stood ready to call in the worthy Schmidt. He was mistaken. Claire drew herself up full of energy and courage. The flame of indignation flushed her cheeks, and dried her tears. "It is false," she cried, "and those who say it are liars! He can not be—no, he can not be an assassin. If he were here, sir, and should himself say, 'It is true,' I would refuse to believe it; I would still cry out: 'It is false!'"

"He has not yet admitted it," continued the magistrate, "but he will confess. Even if he should not, there are more proofs than are needed to convict him."

"Ah! well," interrupted Mademoiselle d'Arlange, in a voice filled with emotion, "I assert, I repeat, that justice is deceived. Yes," she persisted, in answer to the magistrate's gesture of denial, "yes, he is innocent. I am sure of it; and I would proclaim it, even were the whole world to join with you in accusing him."

The investigating magistrate attempted timidly to make an objection; Claire quickly interrupted him. "Must I then, sir," said she, "in order to convince you, forget that I am a young girl, and that I am not talking to my mother, but to a man! For his sake I will do so. It is four years, sir, since we first loved each other. For four years there has never been a secret between us; he lived in me, as I lived in him. He is, like me, alone in the world; his father never loved him. Sustained one by the other, we have passed through many unhappy days; and it is at the very moment our trials are ending that he has become a criminal? Why? tell me, why?"

"Neither the name nor the fortune of the Comte de Commarin would descend to him, mademoiselle; and the knowledge of it came upon him with a sudden shock. One old woman alone was able to prove this. To maintain his position, he killed her."

"What infamy," cried the young girl, "what a shameful, wicked calumny! I know, sir, that story of fallen greatness; he himself told me of it. It is true that for three days this misfortune unmanned him; but, if he was dismayed, it was on my account more than his own. Ah! what to me are that great name, that immense wealth? I owe to them the only unhappiness I have ever known. Was it, then, for such things that I loved him? It was thus that I replied to him; and he, so

sad, immediately recovered his gaiety. He thanked me, saying: 'You love me; the rest is of no consequence.' I chided him, then, for having doubted me; and after that, you pretend that he cowardly assassinated an old woman? You would not dare repeat it." Mademoiselle d'Arlange ceased speaking, a smile of victory on her lips. That smile meant: "At last I have attained my end: you are conquered."

The investigating magistrate did not long leave this smiling illusion to the unhappy child. "You do not know, mademoiselle," he resumed, "how a sudden calamity may affect a good man's reason. God preserve me from doubting all that you have said; but picture to yourself the immensity of the blow which struck M. de Commarin. Can you say that on leaving you he did not give way to despair? Think of the extremities to which it may have led him. He may have been for a time bewildered, and have acted unconsciously."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's face grew deathly pale, and betrayed the utmost terror. The magistrate thought that at last doubt had begun to affect her pure and noble belief. "He must, then, have been mad," she murmured.—"Possibly," replied the magistrate; "and yet the circumstances of the crime denote a well-laid plan. Believe me, then, mademoiselle, and do not be too confident. Pray, and wait patiently for the issue of this terrible trial. You used to have in me the confidence a daughter gives to her father; do not, then, refuse my advice. Remain silent and wait. Hide your grief to all; you might hereafter regret having exposed it. Young, inexperienced, without a guide, without a mother, alas! you sadly misplaced your first affections."

"No, sir, no," stammered Claire. "Ah!" she added, "you talk like the rest of the world, that prudent and egotistical world, which I despise and hate."

"Poor child," continued M. Daburon, pitiless even in his compassion; "unhappy young girl! This is your first deception! But you are young; you are brave; your life will not be ruined. There is no wound, I know by experience, which time does not heal."

Claire tried to grasp what the magistrate was saying, but his words reached her only as confused sounds, their meaning entirely escaped her. "I do not understand you, sir," she said. "What advice, then, do you give me?"

"The only advice that reason dictates, and that my affection

for you can suggest, mademoiselle. I say to you: 'Courage, Claire, resign yourself to the saddest, the greatest sacrifice which honor can ask of a young girl. Weep, yes, weep for your deceived love; but forget it. He whom you have loved is no longer worthy of you.'" The magistrate stopped, slightly frightened. Mademoiselle d'Arlange had become livid. But though the body was weak, the soul still remained firm. "You said just now," she murmured, "that he could only have committed this crime in a moment of distraction, in a fit of madness?"

"Yes, it is possible."

"Then, sir, not knowing what he did, he can not be guilty."—"Neither justice nor society, mademoiselle," he replied, "can take that into account. God alone, who sees into the depths of our hearts, can judge, can decide those questions which human justice must pass by. In our eyes, M. de Commarin is a criminal. Even if he were acquitted, and I wish he may be, but without hope, he will not be less unworthy. Therefore, forget him."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange stopped the magistrate with a look in which flashed the strongest resentment. "That is to say," she exclaimed, "that you counsel me to abandon him in his misfortune. All the world deserts him; and your prudence advises me to act with the world. Men behave thus, I have heard, when one of their friends is down; but women never do. When the last friend has boldly taken to flight, when the last relation has abandoned him, woman remains. I may be timid," she continued with increasing energy, "but I am no coward. I chose Albert voluntarily from among all. Whatever happens, I will never desert him. He would have given me half of his prosperity and of his glory. I will share, whether he wishes it or not, half of his shame and of his misfortune. I love him. It is no more in my power to cease loving him than it is to arrest, by the sole effort of my will, the beating of my heart. You will send him to a convict prison. I will follow him; and in the prison, under the convict's dress, I will yet love him. No, nothing will separate me from him, nothing short of death! And, if he must mount the scaffold, I shall die, I know it, from the blow which kills him."

M. Daburon had buried his face in his hands. He did not wish Claire to perceive a trace of the emotion which affected him. "How she loves him!" he thought, "how she loves him!" All the stings of jealousy were rending him. What would not

be his delight if he were the object of so irresistible a passion as that which burst forth before him! He had, too, a young and ardent soul, a burning thirst for love. Why do so many men pass through life dispossessed of love, while others, the vilest beings sometimes, seem to possess a mysterious power, which charms and seduces, and inspires those blind and impetuous feelings which to assert themselves rush to the sacrifice all the while longing for it? Have women, then, no reason, no discernment? Mademoiselle d'Arlange's silence brought the magistrate back to the reality. He raised his eyes to her. Overcome by the violence of her emotion, she lay back in her chair and breathed with such difficulty that M. Daburon feared she was about to faint. He moved quickly toward the bell, to summon aid; but Claire noticed the movement and stopped him. "What would you do?" she asked.

"You seemed suffering so," he stammered, "that I—"

"It is nothing, sir," replied she. "I may seem weak, but I am not so. It is cruel for a young girl to have to do violence to all her feelings. But I do not regret it; it was for his sake. That which I do regret is my having lowered myself so far as to defend him; but he will forgive me that one doubt. Your assurance took me unawares. A man like him does not need defense: his innocence must be proved; and, God helping me, I will prove it." As Claire was half-rising to depart, M. Daburon detained her by a gesture. In his blindness he thought he would be doing wrong to leave this poor young girl in the slightest way deceived. Having gone so far as to begin, he persuaded himself that his duty bade him go on to the end. He said to himself, in all good faith, that he would thus preserve Claire from herself, and spare her in the future many bitter regrets. "It is painful, mademoiselle—" he began. Claire did not let him finish. "Enough, sir," said she; "all that you can say will be of no avail. I respect your unhappy conviction. If you were truly my friend, I would ask you to aid me in the task of saving him, to which I am about to devote myself. But, doubtless, you would not do so."

"If you knew the proofs which I possess, mademoiselle," he said in a cold tone, "if I detailed them to you, you would no longer hope."

"Speak, sir," cried Claire imperiously.

"You wish it, mademoiselle? Very well; I will give you in detail all the evidence we have collected. There is one which

alone is decisive. The murder was committed on the evening of Shrove Tuesday; and the prisoner can not give an account of what he did on that evening. He went out, however, and only returned home about two o'clock in the morning, his clothes soiled and torn, and his gloves frayed."

"Oh! enough, sir, enough!" interrupted Claire, whose eyes beamed once more with happiness. "You say it was on Shrove Tuesday evening?"—"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Ah! I was sure," she cried triumphantly. "I told you truly that he could not be guilty." She clasped her hands, and from the movement of her lips it was evident that she was praying. The magistrate was so disconcerted that he forgot to admire her. "Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Sir," replied Claire, "if that is your strongest proof, it exists no longer. Albert passed the entire evening you speak of with me."—"With you?" stammered the magistrate.—"Yes, with me, at my home."

M. Daburon was astounded. Was he dreaming? He hardly knew. "What!" he exclaimed, "the vicomte was at your house? Your grandmother, your companion, your servants, they all saw him and spoke to him?"

"No, sir; he came and left in secret. He wished no one to see him; he desired to be alone with me."

"Ah!" said the magistrate with a sigh of relief. The sigh signified: "It's all clear—only too evident. She is determined to save him, at the risk even of compromising her reputation. Poor girl! But has this idea only just occurred to her?" The "Ah!" was interpreted very differently by Mademoiselle d'Arlange. She thought that M. Daburon was astonished at her consenting to receive Albert. "Your surprise is an insult, sir," said she.

"Mademoiselle!"—"A daughter of my family, sir, may receive her betrothed without danger of anything occurring for which she would have to blush."

"I had no such insulting thought as you imagine, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. "I was only wondering how M. de Commarin went secretly to your house when his approaching marriage gave him the right to present himself openly at all hours. I still wonder how, on such a visit, he could get his clothes in the condition in which we found them."

"That is to say, sir," replied Claire bitterly, "that you doubt my word!"—"The circumstances are such, mademoiselle."—"You accuse me, then, of falsehood, sir. Know that, were we crim-

inals, we should not descend to justifying ourselves; we should never pray nor ask for pardon."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's haughty, contemptuous tone could only anger the magistrate. "Above all, mademoiselle," he answered, severely, "I am a magistrate; and I have a duty to perform. A crime has been committed. Everything points to M. Albert de Commarin as the guilty man. I arrest him; I examine him; and I find overwhelming proofs against him. You come and tell me that they are false; that is not enough. So long as you addressed me as a friend, you found me kind and gentle. Now it is the magistrate to whom you speak; and it is the magistrate who answers, 'Prove it.' "—"My word, sir." —"Prove it!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange rose slowly, casting upon the magistrate a look full of astonishment and suspicion. "Would you, then, be glad, sir," she asked, "to find Albert guilty? Would it give you such great pleasure to have him convicted? Are you sure that you are not, armed with the law, revenging yourself upon a rival?"—"This is too much," murmured the magistrate, "this is too much!"

"Do you know the unusual, the dangerous, position we are in at this moment? One day, I remember, you declared your love for me. It appeared to me sincere and honest; it touched me. I was obliged to refuse you because I loved another; and I pitied you. Now that other is accused of murder, and you are his judge; and I find myself between you two, praying to you for him. In undertaking the investigation you acquired an opportunity to help him; and yet you seem to be against him." Every word Claire uttered fell upon M. Daburon's heart like a slap on his face. "Mademoiselle, said he, "your grief has been too much for you. From you alone could I pardon what you have just said. If you think that Albert's fate depends upon my pleasure, you are mistaken. To convince me is nothing; it is necessary to convince others. That I should believe you is all very natural; I know you. But what weight will others attach to your testimony when you go to them with a true story —most true, I believe, but yet highly improbable?"

Tears came into Claire's eyes. "If I have unjustly offended you, sir," said she, "pardon me: misfortune makes one wicked."

"You can not offend me, mademoiselle," replied the magistrate. "I have already told you that I am devoted to your service."

"Then, sir, help me to prove the truth of what I have said. I will tell you everything."

M. Daburon was fully convinced that Claire was seeking to deceive him; but her confidence astonished him.

"Sir," began Claire, "you know what obstacles have stood in the way of my marriage with Albert. The Comte de Commarin would not accept me for a daughter-in-law because I am poor, I possess nothing. It took Albert five years to triumph over his father's objections. At last, about a month ago, he gave his consent of his own accord. But these hesitations, delays, refusals, had deeply hurt my grandmother. Though the wedding day had been fixed, the marquise declared that we should not be compromised nor laughed at again for any apparent haste to contract a marriage so advantageous, that we had often before been accused of ambition. She decided, therefore, that, until the publication of the banns, Albert should only be admitted into the house every other day, for two hours in the afternoon, and in her presence. Such was the state of affairs when, on Sunday morning, a note came to me from Albert. He told me that pressing business would prevent his coming, although it was his regular day. What could have happened to keep him away? I feared some evil. The next day I awaited him impatiently and distracted, when his valet brought Schmidt a note for me. In that letter, sir, Albert entreated me to grant him an interview. It was necessary, he wrote, that he should have a long conversation with me, alone, and without delay. Our whole future, he added, depended upon this interview. He left me to fix the day and hour, urging me to confide in no one. I sent him word to meet me on the Tuesday evening at the little garden gate which opens into an unfrequented street. To inform me of his presence, he was to knock just as nine o'clock chimed at the Invalides."—"Excuse me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon, "what day did you write to M. Albert?"—"On Tuesday."—"Can you fix the hour?"—"I must have sent the letter between two and three o'clock."—'Thanks, mademoiselle. Continue, I pray."

"All my anticipations," continued Claire, "were realized. I retired during the evening, and went into the garden a little before the appointed time. I had procured the key of the little door; and I at once tried it. Unfortunately, I could not make it turn, the lock was so rusty. I was in despair, when nine o'clock struck. At the third stroke, Albert knocked. I told

him of the accident; and threw him the key, that he might try and unlock the door. He tried but without success. I then begged him to postpone our interview. He replied that it was impossible, that what he had to say admitted of no delay; that, during three days he had hesitated about confiding in me, and had suffered martyrdom, and that he could endure it no longer. We were speaking, you must understand, through the door. At last, he declared that he would climb over the wall. I begged him not to do so, fearing an accident. The wall is very high, as you know, the top is covered with pieces of broken glass, and the acacia branches stretch out above like a hedge. But he laughed at my fears, and said that, unless I absolutely forbade him to do so, he was going to attempt to scale the wall. I dared not say no; and he risked it. I was very frightened, and trembled like a leaf. Fortunately, he is very active, and got over without hurting himself. He had come, sir, to tell me of the misfortune which had befallen him. We first of all sat down upon the little seat you know of, in front of the grove; then, as the rain was falling, we took shelter in the summer house. It was past midnight when Albert left me, quieted and almost gay. He went back in the same manner, only with less danger, because I made him use the gardener's ladder, which I laid down alongside the wall when he had reached the other side."

This account, given in the simplest and most natural manner, puzzled M. Daburon. What was he to think? "Mademoiselle," he asked, "had the rain commenced to fall when M. Albert climbed over the wall?"

"No, sir, the first drops fell when we were on the seat; I recollect it very well, because he opened his umbrella, and I thought of Paul and Virginia."

"Excuse me a minute, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. He sat down at his desk, and rapidly wrote two letters. In the first, he gave orders for Albert to be brought at once to his office in the Palais de Justice. In the second, he directed a detective to go immediately to the Faubourg St. Germain to the d'Arlange house, and examine the wall at the bottom of the garden, and make a note of any marks of its having been scaled, if any such existed. He explained that the wall had been climbed twice, both before and during the rain; consequently the marks of the going and returning would be different from each other. He enjoined upon the detective to proceed with the utmost caution, and to invent a plausible pretext

which would explain his investigations. Having finished writing, the magistrate rang for his servant, who soon appeared. "Here," said he, "are two letters, which you must take to my clerk, Constant. Tell him to read them, and to have the orders they contain executed at once—at once, you understand. Run, take a cab, and be quick! Ah! one word. If Constant is not in my office, have him sought for; he will not be far off, as he is waiting for me. Go quickly!" M. Daburon then turned and said to Claire. "Have you kept the letter, mademoiselle, in which M. Albert asked for this interview?"

"Yes, sir, I even think I have it with me." She arose, felt in her pocket, and drew out a much crumpled piece of paper. "Here it is!" The investigating magistrate took it. A suspicion crossed his mind. At a glance, he read the ten lines of the note. "No date," he murmured, "no stamp, nothing at all."

Claire did not hear him; she was racking her brain to find other proofs of the interview. "Sir," said she suddenly, "it often happens, that when we wish to be, and believe ourselves alone, we are nevertheless observed. Summon, I beseech you, all of my grandmother's servants, and inquire if any of them saw Albert that night."

"Inquire of your servants? Can you dream of such a thing, mademoiselle?"

"What, sir? You fear that I shall be compromised. What of that, if he is only freed?" M. Daburon could not help admiring her. What sublime devotion in this young girl, whether she spoke the truth or not!

"That is not all," she added; "the key which I threw to Albert, he did not return it to me; he must have forgotten to do so. If it is found in his possession, it will well prove that he was in the garden."

"I will give orders respecting it, mademoiselle."

"There is still another thing," continued Claire; "while I am here, send some one to examine the wall." She seemed to think of everything.

"That is already done, mademoiselle," replied M. Daburon. "I will not hide from you that one of the letters which I have just sent off ordered an examination of your grandmother's wall, a secret examination, though, be assured." Claire rose joyfully, and for the second time held out her hand to the magistrate. "Oh, thanks!" she said, "a thousand thanks! Now I can well see that you are with me. But I have

still another idea; Albert ought to have the note I wrote on Tuesday."

"No, mademoiselle, he burned it."

Claire drew back. She imagined she felt a touch of irony in the magistrate's reply. There was none, however. M. Daburon remembered the letter thrown into the fire by Albert on the Tuesday afternoon. It could only have been the one Claire had sent him. It was to her, then, that the words, "She can not resist me," applied. He understood, now, the action and the remark. "Can you understand, mademoiselle," he next asked, "how M. de Commarin could lead justice astray, and expose me to committing a most deplorable error, when it would have been so easy to have told me all this?"

"It seems to me, sir, that an honorable man can not confess that he has obtained a secret interview from a lady, until he has full permission from her to do so."

There was nothing to reply to this; and the sentiments expressed by Mademoiselle d'Arlange gave a meaning to one of Albert's replies in the examination. "This is not all yet, mademoiselle," continued the magistrate; "all that you have told me here, you must repeat in my office, at the Palais de Justice. My clerk will take down your testimony, and you must sign it. This proceeding will be painful to you; but it is a necessary formality."

"Ah, sir, I will do so with pleasure. What can I refuse, when I know that he is in prison?" She rose from her seat, readjusting her cloak and the strings of her bonnet. "Is it necessary," she asked "that I should await the return of the police agents who are examining the wall?"

"It is needless, mademoiselle."

"Then," she continued in a sweet voice, "I can only beseech you," she clasped her hands, "conjure you," her eyes implored, "to let Albert out of prison."

"He shall be liberated as soon as possible; I give my word."

"Oh, to-day, dear M. Daburon, to-day, I beg of you, now, at once! Since he is innocent, be kind, for you are our friend. Do you wish me to go down on my knees?"

The magistrate had only just time to extend his arms, and prevent her. He was choking with emotion, the unhappy man! Ah! how much he envied the prisoner's lot! "That which you ask of me is impossible, mademoiselle," said he in an almost inaudible voice, "impracticable, upon my honor. Ah! if it

depended upon me alone, I could not, even were he guilty, see you weep, and resist."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange, hitherto so firm, could no longer restrain her sobs. "Miserable girl that I am!" she cried, "he is suffering, he is in prison; I am free, and yet I can do nothing for him! Can I not find one man who will help me? Yes," she said after a moment's reflection, "there is one man who owes himself to Albert; since he it was who put him in this position—the Comte de Commarin. He is his father, and yet he has abandoned him. Ah, well! I will remind him that he still has a son."

The magistrate rose to see her to the door; but she had already disappeared, taking the kind-hearted Schmidt with her.

M. Daburon, more dead than alive, sank back again in his chair. His eyes filled with tears. "And that is what she is!" he murmured. "Ah! I made no vulgar choice. I had divined and understood all her good qualities." In the midst of his meditations, a sudden thought passed like a flash across his brain. Had Claire spoken the truth? Had she not been playing a part previously prepared? No, most decidedly no! But she might have been herself deceived, might have been the dupe of some skilful trick. In that case old Tabaret's prediction was now realized. Tabaret had said: "Look out for an indisputable alibi." How could he show the falsity of this one, planned in advance, affirmed by Claire, who was herself deceived? How could he expose a plan, so well laid that the prisoner had been able without danger to await certain results, with his arms folded, and without himself moving in the matter?

He arose. "Oh!" he said in a loud voice, as though encouraging himself, "at the Palais, all will be unraveled."

XVI

M. DABURON had been surprised at Claire's visit. M. de Commarin was still more so, when his valet whispered to him that Mademoiselle d'Arlange desired a moment's conversation with him. He hesitated to receive her, fearing a

painful and disagreeable scene. What could she want with him? To inquire about Albert, of course. And what could he reply? He sent a message, asking her to wait a few minutes in one of the little drawing-rooms on the ground floor. He did not keep her waiting long, his appetite having been destroyed by the mere announcement of her visit.

As soon as he appeared, Claire saluted him with one of those graceful, yet highly dignified bows, which distinguished the Marquise d'Arlange. "Sir—," she began.

"You come, do you not, my poor child, to obtain news of the unhappy boy?" asked M. de Commarin.

"No, sir," replied the young girl; "I come, on the contrary, to bring you news. Albert is innocent."

The comte looked at her most attentively, persuaded that grief had affected her reason; but in that case her madness was very quiet. "I never doubted it," continued Claire; "but now I have the most positive proof."

"Are you quite sure of what you are saying?" inquired the comte, whose eyes betrayed his doubt. Mademoiselle d'Arlange understood his thoughts; her interview with M. Daburon had given her experience. "I state nothing which is not of the utmost accuracy," she replied, "and easily proved. I have just come from M. Daburon, the investigating magistrate, who is one of my grandmother's friends; and, after what I told him, he is convinced that Albert is innocent."

"He told you that, Claire!" exclaimed the comte. "My child, are you sure, are you not mistaken?"

"No, sir. I told him something, of which every one was ignorant, and of which Albert, who is a gentleman, could not speak. I told him that Albert passed with me, in my grandmother's garden, all that evening on which the crime was committed. He had asked to see me—"

"But your word will not be sufficient."

"There are proofs, and justice has them by this time."

"Heavens! Is it really possible?" cried the comte, who was beside himself.

"Ah, sir!" said Mademoiselle d'Arlange bitterly, "you are his father, and you suspected him! You do not know him, then. You were abandoning him, without trying to defend him."

M. de Commarin was not difficult to convince. Without thinking, without discussion, he put faith in Claire's assertions. Yes, he had been overcome by the magistrate's certitude, he had told

himself that what was most unlikely was true; and he had bowed his head. Albert innocent! The thought descended upon his heart like heavenly dew. During the last three days, he had discovered how great was his affection for Albert. He had loved him tenderly, for he had never been able to discard him, in spite of his frightful suspicions as to his paternity. For three days, the knowledge of the crime imputed to his unhappy son, the thought of the punishment which awaited him, had nearly killed the father. And after all he was innocent!

"But, then, mademoiselle," asked the comte, "are they going to release him?"

"Alas! sir, I demanded that they should at once set him at liberty. It is just, is it not, since he is not guilty? But the magistrate replied that it was not possible; that he was not the master; that Albert's fate depended on many others. It was then that I resolved to come to you for aid."

"Can I then do something?"

"I at least hope so. I am only a poor girl, very ignorant; and I know no one in the world. I do not know what can be done to get him released from prison. There ought, however, to be some means for obtaining justice. Will you not try all that can be done, sir, you, who are his father?"

"Yes," replied M. de Commarin quickly, "yes, and without losing a minute."

Since Albert's arrest, the comte had been plunged in a dull stupor. In his profound grief, seeing only ruin and disaster about him, he had done nothing to shake off this mental paralysis. The frightful darkness was dispelled; he saw a glimmering on the horizon; he recovered the energy of his youth. "Let us go," he said. Suddenly the radiance in his face changed to sadness, mixed with anger. "But where?" he asked. "At what door shall we knock with any hope of success? In the olden times, I would have sought the king. But to-day! Even the emperor himself can not interfere with the law. We shall certainly have justice; but to obtain it promptly is an art taught in schools that I have not frequented."

"Let us try, at least, sir," persisted Claire. "Let us seek out judges, generals, ministers, any one. Only lead me to them. I will speak; and you shall see if we do not succeed." The comte took Claire's little hands between his own, and held them a moment, pressing them with paternal tenderness. "Brave girl!" he cried, "you are a noble, courageous woman, Claire!

Good blood never fails. I did not know you. Yes, you shall be my daughter; and you shall be happy together, Albert and you. But we must not rush about everywhere, like wild geese. We need some one to tell us whom we should address—some guide, lawyer, barrister. Ah!" he cried, "I have it—Noel!" Claire raised her eyes to the comte's in surprise.

—"He is my son," replied M. de Commarin, evidently embarrassed, "my other son, Albert's brother. The best and worthiest of men," he added, repeating quite appropriately a phrase already uttered by M. Daburon. "He is a barrister; he knows all about the Palais; he will tell us what to do." Noel's name, thus thrown into the midst of this conversation so full of hope, oppressed Claire's heart. The comte perceived her affright. "Do not feel anxious, dear child," he said. "Noel is good; and I will tell you more, he loves Albert. Do not shake your head so; Noel told me himself, on this very spot, that he did not believe Albert guilty. He declared that he intended doing everything to dispel the fatal mistake, and that he would be his barrister. I will send for him," continued M. de Commarin; "he is now with Albert's mother, who brought him up, and who is now on her deathbed."—"Albert's mother!"

"Yes, my child. Albert will explain to you what may perhaps seem to you an enigma. Now time presses. But I think—" He stopped suddenly. He thought that, instead of sending for Noel at Madame Gerdy's, he might go there himself. He would thus see Valerie! and he had longed to see her again so much! It was one of those actions which the heart urges, but which one does not dare risk, because a thousand subtle reasons and interests are against it.

"It will be quicker, perhaps," observed the comte, "to go to Noel."

"Let us start then, sir."

"I hardly know though, my child," said the old gentleman, hesitating, "whether I may, whether I ought to take you with me. Propriety—"

"Ah, sir, propriety has nothing to do with it!" replied Claire impetuously. "With you, and for his sake, I can go anywhere. I am ready, sir."

"Very well, then," said the comte. Then, ringing the bell violently, he called to the servant: "My carriage." In descending the steps, he insisted upon Claire's taking his arm. The gallant and elegant politeness of the friend of the Comte d'Artois

reappeared. "You have taken twenty years from my age," he said; "it is but right that I should devote to you the youth you have restored to me."

As soon as Claire had entered the carriage, he said to the footman: "Rue St. Lazare, quick!" Aided by the concierge's directions, the comte and the young girl went toward Madame Gerdy's apartments. He was, then, about to see her again! His emotion pressed his heart like a vise. "M. Noel Gerdy?" he asked of the servant. The barrister had just that moment gone out. She did not know where he had gone; but he had said he should not be out more than half an hour. "We will wait for him, then," said the comte.

He advanced; and the servant drew back to let them pass. Noel had strictly forbidden her to admit any visitors; but the Comte de Commarin was one of those whose appearance makes servants forget all their orders. Three persons were in the room into which the servant introduced the comte and Mademoiselle d'Arlange. They were the parish priest, the doctor, and a tall man, an officer of the Legion of Honor, whose figure and bearing indicated the old soldier. They were conversing near the fireplace, and the arrival of strangers appeared to astonish them exceedingly. In bowing, in response to M. de Commarin's and Claire's salutations, they seemed to inquire their business; but this hesitation was brief, for the soldier almost immediately offered Mademoiselle d'Arlange a chair.

The comte considered that his presence was inopportune; and he thought that he was called upon to introduce himself and explain his visit. "You will excuse me, gentlemen," said he, "if I am indiscreet. I did not think so when I asked to wait for Noel, whom I have the most pressing need of seeing. I am the Comte de Commarin."

At this name the old soldier let go the back of the chair which he was still holding and haughtily raised his head. An angry light flashed in his eyes, and he made a threatening gesture. His lips moved, as if he were about to speak; but he restrained himself and retired, bowing his head, to the window. Neither the comte nor the two other men noticed his strange behavior; but it did not escape Claire. While Mademoiselle d'Arlange sat down rather surprised, the comte, much embarrassed at his position, went up to the priest, and asked in a low voice: "What is, I pray, M. l'Abbe, Madame Gerdy's condition?"

The doctor, who had a sharp ear, heard the question, and approached quickly. "I fear, sir," he said, "that she can not live throughout the day."

The comte pressed his hand against his forehead, as though he had felt a sudden pain there. "Does she recognize her friends?" he murmured.

"No, sir. Since last evening, however, there has been a great change. She was very uneasy all last night: she had moments of fierce delirium. About an hour ago we thought she was recovering her senses, and we sent for M. l'Abbe."

"Very needlessly, though," put in the priest, "and it is a sad misfortune. Her reason is quite gone. Poor woman! I have known her ten years; I have been to see her nearly every week; I never knew a more worthy person."

"She must suffer dreadfully," said the doctor. Almost at the same instant, and as if to bear out the doctor's words, they heard stifled cries from the next room, the door of which was slightly open. "Do you hear?" exclaimed the comte, trembling from head to foot. Claire understood nothing of this strange scene. Dark presentiments oppressed her; she felt as though she were enveloped in an atmosphere of evil. She grew frightened, rose from her chair, and drew near the comte.

"She is, I presume, in there?" asked M. de Commarin.

"Yes, sir," harshly answered the old soldier, who had also drawn near.

At any other time the comte would have noticed the soldier's tone and have resented it. Now he did not even raise his eyes. He remained insensible to everything. Was she not there, close to him? His thoughts were in the past; it seemed to him but yesterday that he had quitted her for the last time. "I should very much like to see her," he said timidly.—"That is impossible," replied the old soldier.—"Why?" stammered the comte.—"At least, M. de Commarin," replied the soldier, "let her die in peace."

The comte started, as if he had been struck. His eyes encountered the officer's; he lowered them like a criminal before his judge.

"Nothing need prevent the comte's entering Madame Gerdy's room," put in the doctor, who purposely saw nothing of all this. "She would probably not notice his presence; and if—"

"Oh, she would perceive nothing!" said the priest. "I have just spoken to her, taken her hand; she remained quite insen-

sible." The old soldier reflected deeply. "Enter," said he at last to the comte; "perhaps it is God's will."

The comte tottered, so that the doctor offered to assist him. He gently motioned him away. The doctor and the priest entered with him; Claire and the old soldier remained at the threshold of the door, facing the bed. The comte took three or four steps, and was obliged to stop. He wished to, but could not go farther. Could this dying woman really be Valerie? He did not recognize her. But she knew him, or rather divined his presence. With supernatural strength, she raised herself, exposing her shoulders and emaciated arms; then pushing away the ice from her forehead, and throwing back her still plentiful hair, bathed with water and perspiration, she cried: "Guy! Guy!" The comte trembled all over. He did not perceive that which immediately struck all the other persons present—the transformation in the sick woman. Her contracted features relaxed, a celestial joy spread over her face, and her eyes, sunken by disease, assumed an expression of infinite tenderness.

"Guy," said she in a voice heartrending by its sweetness, "you have come at last! How long, O my God! I have waited for you! You can not think what I have suffered by your absence. I should have died of grief had it not been for the hope of seeing you again. Who kept you from me? Your parents again? How cruel of them! Did you not tell them that no one could love you here below as I do? No, that is not it; I remember. You were angry when you left me. Your friends wished to separate us; they said that I was deceiving you with another. But you did not believe the wicked calumny, you scorned it, for you are here? I deceive you?" continued the dying woman; "only a madman would believe it. Am I not yours, your very own, heart and soul? Was I not yours, alone, from the very first? I never hesitated to give myself entirely to you; I felt that I was born for you, Guy, do you remember? I was working for a lace-maker, and was barely earning a living. You told me you were a poor student; I thought you were depriving yourself for me. You insisted on having our little apartment on the Quai St. Michel done up. It was lovely, with the new paper all covered with flowers, which we hung ourselves. From the window we could see the great trees of the Tuileries gardens; and by leaning out a little we could see the sun set through the arches of the bridges. Oh, those happy days! But you deceived me! You were not a poor student.

One day, when taking my work home, I met you in an elegant carriage, with tall footmen, dressed in liveries covered with gold lace, behind. I could not believe my eyes. That evening you told me the truth, that you were a nobleman and immensely rich. Oh, my darling, why did you tell me?"

Had she her reason, or was this a mere delirium? Great tears rolled down the Comte de Commarin's wrinkled face, and the doctor and the priest were touched by the sad spectacle of an old man weeping like a child.

"After that," continued Madame Gerdy, "we left the Quai Saint-Michel. You wished it; and I obeyed in spite of my apprehensions. You told me that, to please you, I ought to look like a great lady. You provided teachers for me, for I was so ignorant that I scarcely knew how to sign my name. Do you remember the queer spelling in my first letter? Ah, Guy, if you had really only been a poor student! When I knew that you were so rich, I lost my simplicity, my thoughtfulness, my gaiety. I feared that you would think me covetous, that you would imagine that your fortune influenced my love. Men who, like you, have millions, must be unhappy! They must be always doubting and full of suspicions; they can never be sure whether it is themselves or their gold which is loved, and this awful doubt makes them mistrustful, jealous, and cruel. Oh, my dearest, why did we leave our dear little room? There we were happy. You thought to raise me, but you only sunk me lower. You were proud of our love; you published it abroad. Vainly I asked you in mercy to leave me in obscurity and unknown. Soon the whole town knew that I was your mistress. Every one was talking of the money you spent on me. How I blushed at the flaunting luxury you thrust upon me! You were satisfied, because my beauty became celebrated; I wept, because my shame became so too. Was not my name in the papers? And it was through the same papers that I heard of your approaching marriage. Unhappy woman! I should have fled from you, but I had not the courage. I resigned myself, without an effort, to the most humiliating, the most shameful of positions. You were married, and I remained your mistress. Oh, what anguish I suffered during that terrible evening. I was alone in my own home, in that room so associated with you; and you were marrying another! I said to myself: 'At this moment a pure, noble young girl is giving herself to him.' I said again: 'What oaths is that mouth, which

has so often pressed my lips, now taking?' Often since that dreadful misfortune I have asked heaven what crime I had committed that I should be so terribly punished? This was the crime: I remained your mistress, and your wife died. I only saw her once, and then scarcely for a minute, but she looked at you, and I knew that she loved you as only I could. Ah, Guy, it was our love that killed her!"

She stopped exhausted, but none of the bystanders moved. They listened breathlessly, and waited with feverish emotion for her to resume.

"Who," continued the sick woman, unconscious of all that was passing about her, "who told you I was deceiving you? Oh, the wretches! They set spies upon me; they discovered that an officer came frequently to see me. But that officer was my brother, my dear Louis! When he was eighteen years old, and being unable to obtain work, he enlisted, saying to my mother that there would then be one mouth the less in the family. He was a good soldier, and his officers always liked him. He was promoted a lieutenant, then captain, and finally became major. Louis always loved me; had he remained in Paris I should not have fallen. But our mother died, and I was left all alone in this great city. He was a non-commissioned officer when he first knew that I had a lover; and he was so enraged that I feared he would never forgive me. But he did forgive me, saying that my constancy in my error was its only excuse. Ah, my friend, he was more jealous of your honor than you yourself! He came to see me in secret, because I placed him in the unhappy position of blushing for his sister. Could a brave soldier confess that his sister was the mistress of a comte? That it might not be known, I took the utmost precautions, but alas! only to make you doubt me. When Louis knew what was said he wished in his blind rage to challenge you; and then I was obliged to make him think that he had nc right to defend me. What misery! Ah, I have paid dearly for my years of stolen happiness! But you are here, and all is forgotten. For you do believe me, do you not, Guy? I will write to Louis: he will come, he will tell you that I do not lie, and you can not doubt his, a soldier's word."

"Yes, on my honor," said the old soldier, "what my sister says is the truth."

The dying woman did not hear him; she continued in a voice panting from weariness: "How your presence revives me. I

feel that I am growing stronger. I have nearly been very ill. I am afraid I am not very pretty to-day; but never mind, kiss me!" She opened her arms, and thrust out her lips as if to kiss him. "But it is one condition, Guy, that you will leave me my child? Oh! I beg of you, I entreat you, not to take him from me; leave him to me. What is a mother without her child? You are anxious to give him an illustrious name, an immense fortune. No! You tell me that this sacrifice will be for his good. No! My child is mine: I will keep him. The world has no honors, no riches, which can replace a mother's love. You wish to give me in exchange that other woman's child. Never! What! you would have that woman embrace my boy! It is impossible. Take away this strange child from me; he fills me with horror; I want my own! Ah, do not insist, do not threaten me with anger, do not leave me. I should give in, and then I should die. Guy, forget this fatal project, the thought of it alone is a crime. Can not my prayers, my tears, can nothing move you? Ah, well God will punish us. All will be discovered. The day will come when these children will demand a fearful reckoning. Guy, I foresee the future; I see my son coming toward me, justly angered. What does he say, great heaven! Oh, those letters, those letters, sweet memories of our love! My son, he threatens me! He strikes me! Ah, help! A son strike his mother. Tell no one of it, though. Oh, my God, what torture! Yet he knows well that I am his mother. He pretends not to believe me. Lord, this is too much! Guy! pardon! oh, my only friend! I have neither the power to resist nor the courage to obey you."

At this moment the door opening on to the landing opened, and Noel appeared, pale as usual, but calm and composed. The dying woman saw him, and the sight affected her like an electric shock. A terrible shudder shook her frame; her eyes grew inordinately large; her hair seemed to stand on end. She raised herself on her pillows, stretched out her arm in the direction where Noel stood, and in a loud voice exclaimed: "Assassin!"

She fell back convulsively on the bed. Some one hastened forward: she was dead. A deep silence prevailed. All the bystanders were deeply moved by this painful scene, this last confession, wrested so to say from the delirium. And the last word uttered by Madame Gerdy, "assassin," surprised no one. All, excepting the nun, knew of the awful accusation which had been made against Albert. To him they applied the unfortu-

nate mother's malediction. Noel seemed quite broken-hearted. Kneeling by the bedside of her who had been as a mother to him, he took one of her hands, and pressed it close to his lips. "Dead!" he groaned; "she is dead."

Fallen into a chair, his head thrown back, the Comte de Commarin was more overwhelmed and more livid than this dead woman, his old love, once so beautiful. Claire and the doctor hastened to assist him. They undid his cravat, and took off his collar, for he was suffocating. With the help of the old soldier, whose red, tearful eyes told of suppressed grief, they moved the comte's chair to the half-opened window to give him a little air. Three days before this scene would have killed him. But the heart hardens by misfortune, like hands by labor. "His tears have saved him," whispered the doctor to Claire.

M. de Commarin gradually recovered, and, as his thoughts became clearer, his sufferings returned. The comte's gaze was fixed upon the bed where lay Valerie's body. The soul, that soul so devoted and so tender, had flown. What would he not have given if God would have restored that unfortunate woman to life for a day, or even for an hour? Upon a mere suspicion, without deigning to inquire, without giving her a hearing, he had treated her with the coldest contempt. Why had he not seen her again? He would have spared himself twenty years of doubt as to Albert's birth. Then he remembered the comtesse's death. She also had loved him, and had died of her love. He had not understood them; he had killed them both. The hour of expiation had come; and he could not say: "Lord, the punishment is too great," and yet, what punishment, what misfortunes, during the last five days!

"Yes," he stammered, "she predicted it. Why did I not listen to her?" Madame Gerdy's brother pitied the old man, so severely tried. He held out his hand. "M. de Commarin," he said, in a grave, sad voice, "my sister forgave you long ago, even if she ever had any ill feeling against you. It is my turn to-day; I forgive you sincerely."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the comte, "thank you." And then he added: "What a death!"

"Yes," murmured Claire, "she breathed her last in the idea that her son was guilty of a crime. And we were not able to undeceive her."

"At least," cried the comte, "her son should be free to render her his last duties; yes, he must be. Noel!" The barrister had

approached his father, and heard all. "I have promised, father," he replied, "to save him."

For the first time, Mademoiselle d'Arlange was face to face with Noel. Their eyes met, and she could not restrain a movement of repugnance, which the barrister perceived. "Albert is already saved," she said proudly. "What we ask is that prompt justice shall be done him; that he shall be immediately set at liberty. The magistrate now knows the truth."

"How the truth?" exclaimed the barrister.

"Yes; Albert passed at my house, with me, the evening the crime was committed." Noel looked at her surprised; so singular a confession from such a mouth, without explanation, might well surprise him. She drew herself up haughtily. "I am Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, sir," said she.

M. de Commarin now quickly ran over all the incidents reported by Claire. When he had finished, Noel replied: "You see, sir, my position at this moment, to-morrow—"

"To-morrow?" interrupted the comte, "you said, I believe, to-morrow! Honor demands, sir, that we act to-day, at this moment. You can show your love for this poor woman much better by delivering her son than by praying for her." Noel bowed low. "To hear your wish, sir, is to obey it," he said; "I go. This evening, at your house, I shall have the honor of giving you an account of my proceedings. Perhaps I shall be able to bring Albert with me."

He spoke, and, again embracing the dead woman, went out. Soon the comte and Mademoiselle d'Arlange also retired. The old soldier went to the Mairie, to give notice of the death, and to fulfil the necessary formalities. The nun alone remained to watch the corpse.

XVII

M. DABURON was ascending the stairs that led to the offices of the investigating magistrates, when he saw old Tabaret coming toward him. The sight pleased him, and he at once called out: "M. Tabaret!"

"You must excuse me, sir," he said, bowing, "but I am expected at home."

"I hope, however—"

"Oh, he is innocent," interrupted old Tabaret. "I have already some proofs; and before three days— But you are going to see Gevrol's man with the earrings. He is very cunning, Gevrol: I misjudged him." And without listening to another word, he hurried away. M. Daburon, greatly disappointed, also hastened on. In the passage, on a bench of rough wood before his office door, Albert sat awaiting him, under the charge of a Garde de Paris. "You will be summoned immediately, sir," said the magistrate to the prisoner, as he opened his door.

In the office, Constant was talking with a skinny little man. "You received my letters?" asked M. Daburon of his clerk.—"Your orders have been executed, sir: the prisoner is without, and here is M. Martin, who this moment arrived from the neighborhood of the Invalides."

"That is well," said the magistrate in a satisfied tone. And, turning toward the detective: "Well, M. Martin," he asked, "what did you see?"—"The walls have been scaled, sir."—"Lately?"—"Five or six days ago."—"You are sure of this?"—"As sure as I am that I see M. Constant at this moment mending his pen."—"The marks are plain?"—"As plain as the nose on my face, sir. The thief entered the garden before the rain, and went away after it, as you had conjectured. This circumstance is easy to establish by examining the marks on the wall of the ascent and the descent on the side toward the street. These marks are several abrasions, evidently made by the feet of some one climbing. The first are clean; the others, muddy. The scamp in getting in pulled himself up by the strength of his wrists: but when going away, he enjoyed the luxury of a ladder, which he threw down as soon as he was on the top of the wall. One can see where he placed it, by holes made in the ground by the fellow's weight; and also by the mortar which has been knocked away from the top of the wall."

"Is that all?" asked the magistrate.

"Not yet, sir. Three of the pieces of glass which cover the top of the wall have been removed. Several of the acacia branches, which extend over the wall have been twisted or broken. Adhering to the thorns of one of these branches, I found this little piece of lavender kid, which appears to me to belong to a glove."

The magistrate eagerly seized the piece of kid. It had evidently come from a glove. "You took care, I hope, M. Martin," said M. Daburon, "not to attract attention at the house where you made this investigation?"

"Certainly, sir. I first of all examined the exterior of the wall at my leisure. After that, leaving my hat at a wine-shop round the corner, I called at the Marquise d'Arlange's house, pretending to be the servant of a neighboring duchess, who was in despair at having lost a favorite parrot. I was very kindly given permission to explore the garden; and, as I spoke as disrespectfully as possible of my pretended mistress, they, no doubt, took me for a genuine servant."

"You are an adroit and prompt fellow, M. Martin," interrupted the magistrate. "I am well satisfied with you; and I will report you favorably at headquarters." He rang his bell, while the detective, delighted at the praise he had received, moved backward to the door, bowing the while.

Albert was then brought in. "Have you decided, sir," asked the investigating magistrate without preamble, "to give me a true account of how you spent last Tuesday evening?"—"I have already told you, sir."—"No, sir, you have not; and I regret to say that you lied to me." Albert, at this apparent insult, turned red, and his eyes flashed.

"I know all that you did on that evening," continued the magistrate, "because justice, as I have already told you, is ignorant of nothing that it is important for it to know." Then, looking straight into Albert's eyes, he continued slowly: "I have seen Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange."

On hearing that name, the prisoner's features, contracted by a firm resolve not to give way, relaxed. However, he made no reply.

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange," continued the magistrate, "has told me where you were on Tuesday evening." Albert still hesitated. "I am not setting a trap for you," added M. Daburon; "I give you my word of honor. She has told me all, you understand?"

This time Albert decided to speak. His explanations corresponded exactly with Claire's; not one detail more. Henceforth, doubt was impossible. Mademoiselle d'Arlange had not been imposed upon. Either Albert was innocent, or she was his accomplice. Could she knowingly be the accomplice of such an odious crime? No; she could not even be suspected of it.

But who then was the assassin? For, when a crime has been committed, justice demands a culprit.

"You see, sir," said the magistrate severely to Albert, "you did deceive me. You risked your life, sir, and, what is also very serious, you exposed me, you exposed justice, to the chance of committing a most deplorable mistake. Why did you not tell me the truth at once?"

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange, sir," replied Albert, "in according me a meeting, trusted in my honor."

"And you would have died sooner than mention that interview?" interrupted M. Daburon with a touch of irony. "That is all very fine, sir, and worthy of the days of chivalry!"

"I am not the hero that you suppose, sir," replied the prisoner simply. "If I told you that I did not count on Claire, I should be telling a falsehood. I was waiting for her. I knew that, on learning of my arrest, she would brave everything to save me. But her friends might have hid it from her; and that was what I feared. In that event, I do not think, so far as one can answer for one's self, that I should have mentioned her name."

There was no appearance of bravado. What Albert said, he thought and felt. M. Daburon regretted his irony. "Sir," he said kindly, "you must return to your prison. I can not release you yet; but you will be no longer in solitary confinement. You will be treated with every attention due to a prisoner whose innocence appears probable." Albert bowed, and thanked him; and was then removed.

"We are now ready for Gevrol," said the magistrate to his clerk. The chief of detectives was absent: he had been sent for from the Prefecture of Police; but his witness, the man with the earrings, was waiting in the passage. He was told to enter. He was one of those short, thick-set men, powerful as oaks, who can carry almost any weight on their broad shoulders. His white hair and whiskers set off his features, hardened and tanned by the inclemency of the weather, the sea winds and the heat of the tropics. He had large callous black hands, with big sinewy fingers which must have possessed the strength of a vise. Great earrings in the form of anchors hung from his ears. He was dressed in the costume of a well-to-do Normandy fisherman out for a holiday. The clerk was obliged to push him into the office, for this son of the ocean was timid and abashed when on shore. M. Daburon examined him, and esti-

mated him at a glance. There was no doubt but that he was the sunburnt man described by one of the witnesses at La Jonchere. It was also impossible to doubt his honesty.

"Your name?" demanded the investigating magistrate.—"Marie Pierre Lerouge."—"Are you, then, related to Claudine Lerouge?"—"I am her husband, sir."

"Every one believed her a widow. She herself pretended to be one."—"Yes, for in that way she partly excused her conduct. Besides, it was an arrangement between ourselves. I had told her that I would have nothing more to do with her."—"Indeed? Well, you know that she is dead, victim of an odious crime?"—"The detective who brought me here told me of it, sir," replied the sailor, his face darkening. "She was a wretch!" he added in a hollow voice.—"How? You, her husband, accuse her?"—"I have but too good reason to do so, sir. Ah, my dead father, who foresaw it all at the time, warned me! I laughed, when he said: 'Take care, or she will dishonor us all.' He was right. Through her, I have been hunted down by the police, just like some skulking thief. Everywhere that they inquired after me with their warrant, people must have said: 'Ah, ha, he has then committed some crime!' And here I am before a magistrate! Ah, sir, what a disgrace! The Lerouges have been honest people, from father to son, ever since the world began. Yes, she was a wicked woman; and I have often told her that she would come to a bad end."—"You told her that?"—"More than a hundred times, sir."—"When did you warn her so wisely?"

"Ah, a long time ago, sir," replied the sailor, "the first time was more than thirty years back. She had ambition even in her blood; she wished to mix herself up in the intrigues of the great. It was that that ruined her. She said that one got money for keeping secrets; and I said that one got disgraced and that was all. But she had a will of her own."

"You were her husband, though," objected M. Daburon, "you had the right to command her obedience." The sailor shook his head, and heaved a deep sigh. "Alas, sir! it was I who obeyed."

"In what intrigues did your wife mingle?" asked he. "Go on, my friend, tell me everything exactly; here, you know, we must have not only the truth, but the whole truth."

Lerouge placed his hat on a chair. Then he began alternately to pull his fingers, making them crack almost sufficiently

to break them, and ultimately scratched his head violently. It was his way of arranging his ideas. "I must tell you," he began, "that it will be thirty-five years on St. John's day since I fell in love with Claudine. She was a pretty, neat, fascinating girl, with a voice sweeter than honey. She was the most beautiful girl in our part of the country, straight as a mast, supple as a willow, graceful and strong as a racing boat. Her eyes sparkled like old cider; her hair was black, her teeth as white as pearls, and her breath was as fresh as the sea breeze. The misfortune was that she hadn't a sou, while we were in easy circumstances. Her mother, who was the widow of I can't say how many husbands, was, saving your presence, a bad woman, and my father was the worthiest man alive. When I spoke to the old fellow of marrying Claudine he swore fiercely, and eight days after, he sent me to Oporto on a schooner belonging to one of our neighbors, just to give me a change of air. I came back, at the end of six months, thinner than a thole, but more in love than ever. Recollections of Claudine scorched me like a fire. I could scarcely eat or drink; but I felt that she loved me a little in return, for I was a fine young fellow, and more than one girl had set her cap at me. Then my father, seeing that he could do nothing, that I was wasting away, and was on the road to join my mother in the cemetery, decided to let me complete my folly. So one evening, after we had returned from fishing and I got up from supper without tasting it, he said to me: 'Marry the hag's daughter, and let's have no more of this.' The evening after the wedding, and when the relatives and guests had departed, I was about to join my wife, when I perceived my father all alone in a corner weeping. The sight touched my heart, and I had a foreboding of evil; but it quickly passed away. For two years, in spite of a few little quarrels, everything went on nicely. Claudine managed me like a child. Ah, she was cunning! She might have seized and bound me, and carried me to market and sold me, without my noticing it. Her great fault was her love of finery. All that I earned, and my business was very prosperous, she put on her back. At the baptism of our son, who was called Jacques after my father, to please her, I squandered all I had economized during my youth, more than three hundred pistoles, with which I had intended purchasing a meadow that lay in the midst of our property. I was well enough pleased, until one morning I saw one of the Comte de Commarin's ser-

vants entering our house; the comte's chateau is only about a mile from where I lived on the other side of the town. It was a fellow named Germain, whom I didn't like at all. I asked my wife what the fellow wanted; she replied that he had come to ask her to take a child to nurse. I would not hear of it at first, for our means were sufficient to allow Claudine to keep all her milk for our own child. But she gave me the very best of reasons. She said she regretted her past flirtations and her extravagance. She wished to earn a little money, being ashamed of doing nothing while I was killing myself with work. She was to get a very good price, that we could save up to go toward the three hundred pistoles. That confounded meadow, to which she alluded, decided me."

"Did she not tell you of the commission with which she was charged?" asked the magistrate.

This question astonished Lerouge. He thought that there was good reason to say that justice sees and knows everything. "Not then," he answered; "but you will see. Eight days after, the postman brought a letter, asking her to go to Paris to fetch the child. It arrived in the evening. 'Very well,' said she, 'I will start to-morrow by the diligence.' I didn't say a word then; but next morning, when she about to take her seat in the diligence, I declared that I was going with her. She didn't seem at all angry, on the contrary. She kissed me, and I was delighted. At Paris she was to call for the little one at a Madame Gerdy's, who lived on the Boulevard. We arranged that she should go alone, while I waited for her at our inn. After she had gone, I grew uneasy. I went out soon after and prowled about near Madame Gerdy's house, making inquiries of the servants and others: I soon discovered that she was the Comte de Commarin's mistress. I felt so annoyed that, if I had been master, my wife should have come away without the little bastard. Claudine, sir, was more obstinate than a mule. After three days of violent discussion, she obtained from me a reluctant consent, between two kisses. Then she told me that we were going to return home by the diligence. The lady, who feared the fatigue of the journey for her child, had arranged that we should travel back by short stages, in her carriage, and drawn by her horses. For she was kept in grand style. We were, therefore, installed with the children, mine and the other, in an elegant carriage, drawn by magnificent animals, and driven by a coachman in livery. My wife was mad with joy; she

kissed me over and over again, and chinked handfuls of gold in my face. I felt as foolish as an honest husband who finds money in his house which he didn't earn himself. Seeing how I felt, Claudine, hoping to pacify me, resolved to tell me the whole truth. 'See here,' she said to me—" Lerouge stopped, and, changing his tone, said: "You understand that it is my wife who is speaking?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."—"She said to me, shaking her pocket full of money, 'See here, my man, we shall always have as much of this as ever we may want, and this is why: The comte, who also had a legitimate child at the same time as this bastard, wishes that this one shall bear his name instead of the other; and this can be accomplished, thanks to me. On the road we shall meet at the inn, where we are to sleep, M. Germain and the nurse to whom they have entrusted the legitimate son. We shall be put in the room, and during the night I am to change the little ones, who have been purposely dressed alike. For this the comte gives me eight thousand francs down and a life annuity of a thousand francs.' I could say nothing at first, I was so choked with rage. But she, who was generally afraid of me when I was in a passion, burst out laughing, and said: 'What a fool you are! Listen, before turning sour like a bowl of milk. The comte is the only one who wants this change made; and he is the one that's to pay for it. His mistress, this little one's mother, doesn't want it at all; she merely pretended to consent, so as not to quarrel with her lover, and because she has got a plan of her own. She took me aside during my visit in her room, and, after having made me swear secrecy on a crucifix, she told me that she couldn't bear the idea of separating herself from her babe forever, and of bringing up another's child. She added that, if I would agree not to change the children, and not to tell the comte, she would give me ten thousand francs down, and guarantee me an annuity equal to the one the comte had promised me. She declared, also, that she could easily find out whether I kept my word, as she had made a mark of recognition on her little one. She didn't show me the mark, and I have examined him carefully, but can't find it. Do you understand now. I merely take care of this little fellow here; I tell the comte that I have changed the children; we receive from both sides, and Jacques will be rich. Now kiss your little wife who has more sense than you, you old dear!' That, sir, is word for

word what Claudine said to me." M. Daburon was confounded. He felt himself utterly routed.

"What Claudine proposed to me," continued the sailor, "was villainous; and I am an honest man. She proved to me that we were wronging no one, that we were making little Jacques's fortune, and I was silenced. At evening we arrived at some village; and the coachman, stopping the carriage before an inn, told us we were to sleep there. We entered, and who do you think we saw? That scamp, Germain, with a nurse carrying a child dressed so exactly like the one we had that I was startled. They had journeyed there, like ourselves, in one of the comte's carriages. A suspicion crossed my mind. How could I be sure that Claudine had not invented the second story to pacify me? I resolved not to lose sight of the little bastard, swearing that they shouldn't change it; so I kept him all the evening on my knees, and, to be all the more sure, I tied my handkerchief about his waist. Ah! the plan had been well laid. After supper some one spoke of retiring, and then it turned out that there were only two double-bedded rooms in the house. It seemed as though it had been built expressly for the scheme. The innkeeper said that the two nurses might sleep in one room, and Germain and myself in the other. Do you understand, sir? Add to this that during the evening I had surprised looks of intelligence passing between my wife and that rascally servant, and you can imagine how furious I was. It was conscience that spoke, and I was trying to silence it. As for me, I upset that arrangement, pretending to be too jealous to leave my wife a minute. They were obliged to give way to me. The other nurse went up to bed first. Claudine and I followed soon afterward. My wife undressed and got into bed with our son and the little bastard. I did not undress. Under the pretext that I should be in the way of the children, I installed myself in a chair near the bed, determined not to shut my eyes, and to keep close watch. I put out the candle, in order to let the women sleep. Toward midnight I heard Claudine moving. I held my breath. Was she going to change the children? I was beside myself, and seizing her by the arm, I commenced to beat her roughly, giving free vent to all that I had on my heart. The other nurse cried out as though she were being murdered. At this uproar Germain rushed in with a lighted candle. Not knowing what I was doing, I drew from my pocket a long Spanish knife, which I always carried, and, seizing the cursed

bastard, I thrust the blade through his arm, crying, 'This way, at least, he can't be changed without my knowing it; he is marked for life!' "

The magistrate's stern glance harassed Lerouge, and urged him on, like the whip which flogs the negro slave overcome with fatigue.

"The little fellow's wound," he resumed, "bled dreadfully, and he might have died; but I didn't think of that. I was only troubled about the future. I declared that I would write out all that had occurred, and that every one should sign it. This was done; we could, all four, write. Germain didn't dare resist, for I spoke with knife in hand. He wrote his name first, begging me to say nothing about it to the comte, swearing that, for his part, he would never breathe a word of it, and pledging the other nurse to a like secrecy."

"And have you kept this paper?" asked M. Daburon.

"Yes, sir, and as the detective to whom I confessed all advised me to bring it with me, I went to take it from the place where I always kept it, and I have it here."—"Give it to me."

Lerouge took from his coat pocket an old parchment pocket-book, fastened with a leather thong, and withdrew from it a paper yellowed by age and carefully sealed. "Here it is," said he. "The paper hasn't been opened since that accursed night." It was really a brief description of the scene, described by the old sailor. The four signatures were there. "What has become of the witnesses who signed this declaration?" murmured the magistrate, speaking to himself. Lerouge replied: "Germain is dead. I have been told that he was drowned while out rowing. Claudine has just been assassinated; but the other nurse still lives. I even know that she spoke of the affair to her husband, for he hinted as much to me. His name is Brossette, and he lives in the village of Commarin itself."

"And what next?" asked the magistrate after having taking down the name and address.

"The next day, sir, Claudine managed to pacify me, and extorted a promise of secrecy. The child was scarcely ill at all; but he retained an enormous scar on his arm."—"Was Madame Gerdy informed of what took place?"—"I do not think so, sir. But I would rather say that I do not know."—"What! you do not know?"—"Yes, sir, I swear it. You see my ignorance comes from what happened afterward."—"What happened, then?"—The sailor hesitated. "That, sir, concerns only myself, and—"

"My friend," interrupted the magistrate, "you are an honest man, I believe; in fact, I am sure of it. All that is said here, and which is not directly connected with the crime, will remain secret; even I will forget it immediately."

"Alas, sir," answered the sailor, "I have been already greatly punished; and it is a long time since my troubles began. Claudine was a coquette; but she had a great many other vices. When she realized how much money we had these vices showed themselves, just like a fire, smoldering at the bottom of the hold, bursts forth when you open the hatches. In our house there was feasting without end. Whenever I went to sea she would entertain the worst women in the place; and there was nothing too good or too expensive for them. Well, one night, when she thought me at Rouen, I returned unexpectedly. I entered, and found her with a man. A miserable-looking wretch —the bailiff's clerk. I should have killed him, like the vermin that he was; it was my right, but he was such a pitiful object. I took him by the neck and pitched him out of the window, without opening it. It didn't kill him. Then I fell upon my wife and beat her until she couldn't stir. I pardoned her, but the man who beats his wife and then pardons her is lost. In the future she took better precautions, became a greater hypocrite, and that was all. In the mean while Madame Gerdy took back her child, and Claudine had nothing more to restrain her. My house became the resort of all the good-for-nothing rogues in the country, for whom my wife brought out bottles of wine and brandy whenever I was away at sea, and they got drunk promiscuously. When money failed, she wrote to the comte or his mistress, and the orgies continued. It was a cursed life. My neighbors despised me, and turned their backs on me; they believed me an accomplice or a willing dupe. People wondered where all the money came from that was spent in my house. Fortunately, though, my poor father was dead."

M. Daburon pitied the speaker sincerely. "Rest a while, my friend," he said; "compose yourself."

"No," replied the sailor, "I would rather get through with it quickly. One man, the priest, had the charity to tell me of it. Without losing a minute, I went and saw a lawyer. He said that nothing could be done. When once a man has given his name to a woman, he told me, he can not take it back; it belongs to her for the rest of her days, and she has a right to

dispose of it. She may sully it, cover it with mire, drag it from wine-shop to wine-shop, and her husband can do nothing. That same day, I sold the fatal meadow, and sent the proceeds of it to Claudine, wishing to keep nothing of the price of shame. I then had a document drawn up, authorizing her to administer our property, but not allowing her either to sell or mortgage it. Then I wrote her a letter in which I told her that she need never expect to hear of me again, that I was nothing more to her, and that she might look upon herself as a widow. That same night I went away with my son."

"And what became of your wife after your departure?"—"I can not say, sir; I only know that she quitted the neighborhood a year after I did."—"You have never lived with her since?"—"Never."—"But you were at her house three days before the crime was committed."—"That is true, but it was absolutely necessary. I had had much trouble to find her, no one knew what had become of her. Fortunately my notary was able to procure Madame Gerdy's address; he wrote to her, and that is how I learned that Claudine was living at La Jonchere. I was then at Rouen. Captain Gervais, who is a friend of mine, offered to take me to Paris on his boat, and I accepted. Ah, sir, what a shock I experienced when I entered her house! My wife did not know me! By constantly telling every one that I was dead, she had without a doubt ended by believing it herself. When I told her my name, she fell back in her chair. The wretched woman had not changed in the least; she had by her side a glass and a bottle of brandy."—"All this doesn't explain why you went to seek your wife."—"It was on Jacques's account, sir, that I went. The youngster has grown to be a man; and he wants to marry. For that, his mother's consent was necessary; and I was taking to Claudine a document which the notary had drawn up, and which she signed. This is it."

M. Daburon took the paper, and appeared to read it attentively. After a moment he asked: "Have you thought who could have assassinated your wife?" Lerouge made no reply. "Do you suspect any one?" persisted the magistrate.—"Well, sir," replied the sailor, "what can I say? I thought that Claudine had wearied out the people from whom she drew money, like water from a well; or else getting drunk one day, she had blabbed too freely."

The testimony being as complete as possible, M. Daburon dismissed Lerouge, at the same time telling him to wait for Gevrol,

who would take him to a hotel, where he might wait, at the disposal of justice, until further orders. "All your expenses will be paid you," added the magistrate.

M. Daburon, usually the most prudent of men, had considered as simple one of the most complex of cases. He had acted in a mysterious crime, which demanded the utmost caution, as carelessly as though it were a case of simple misdemeanor. Why? Because his memory had not left him his free deliberation, judgment, and discernment. Thinking himself sure of his facts, he had been carried away by his animosity. The singular part of it all was that the magistrate's faults sprang from his very honesty. The scruples which troubled him had filled his mind with fantoms, and had prompted in him the passionate animosity he had displayed at a certain moment. Calmer now, he examined the case more soundly. As a whole, thank heaven! there was nothing done which could not be repaired. At that moment he resolved that he would never undertake another investigation. His profession henceforth inspired him with an unconquerable loathing. Too pious a man to think of suicide, he asked himself with anguish what would become of him when he threw aside his magistrate's robes. Then he turned again to the business in hand. In any case, innocent or guilty, Albert was really the Vicomte de Commarin, the comte's legitimate son. But was he guilty? Evidently he was not. "I think," exclaimed M. Daburon suddenly, "I must speak to the Comte de Commarin. Constant, send to his house a message for him to come here at once; if he is not at home, he must be sought for."

M. Daburon felt that an unpleasant duty was before him. He would be obliged to say to the old nobleman: "Sir, your legitimate son is not Noel, but Albert." As a compensation, though, he could tell him that Albert was innocent. To Noel he would also have to tell the truth: hurl him to earth, after having raised him among the clouds. What a blow it would be! But, without doubt, the comte would make him some compensation; at least, he ought to.

"Now," murmured the magistrate, "who can be the criminal?"

OLD TABARET talked, but he acted also. Lavish with his money, the old fellow had gathered together a dozen detectives on leave or rogues out of work; and at the head of these worthy assistants, seconded by his friend Lecoq, he had gone to Bougival. He had actually searched the country, house by house, with the obstinacy and the patience of a maniac hunting for a needle in a haystack.

After three days' investigation, he felt comparatively certain that the assassin had not left the train at Rueil, as all the people of Bougival, La Jonchere, and Marly do, but had gone on as far as Chatou. Tabaret thought he recognized him in a man described to him by the porters at that station as rather young, dark, and with black whiskers, carrying an overcoat and an umbrella. This person, who arrived by the train which left Paris for St. Germain at thirty-five minutes past eight in the evening, had appeared to be in a very great hurry. On quitting the station, he had started off at a rapid pace on the road which led to Bougival. Upon the way, two men from Marly and a woman from La Malmaison had noticed him on account of his rapid pace. He smoked as he hurried along. On crossing the bridge which joins the two banks of the Seine at Bougival, he had been still more noticed. It is usual to pay a toll on crossing this bridge; and the supposed assassin had apparently forgotten this circumstance. He passed without paying, keeping up his rapid pace, pressing his elbows to his side, husbanding his breath, and the gatekeeper was obliged to run after him for his toll. He seemed greatly annoyed, threw the man a ten-sou piece, and hurried on, without waiting for the nine sous change. Nor was that all. The station-master at Rueil remembered that, two minutes before the quarter-past ten train came up, a passenger arrived very agitated, and so out of breath that he could scarcely ask for a second-class ticket for Paris. The appearance of this man corresponded exactly with the description given of him by the porters at

Chatou, and by the gatekeeper at the bridge. Finally, the old man thought he was on the track of some one who entered the same carriage as the breathless passenger. He had been told of a baker living at Asnieres, and he had written to him, asking him to call at his house.

Such was old Tabaret's information, when on the Monday morning he called at the Palais de Justice, in order to find out if the record of Widow Lerouge's past life had been received. He found that nothing had arrived, but in the passage he met Gevrol and his man. The chief of detectives was triumphant, and showed it too. As soon as he saw Tabaret, he called out: "Well, my illustrious mare's-nest hunter, what news? Have you had any more scoundrels guillotined since the other day?"

Instead of retaliating, he bowed his head in such a penitent manner that Gevrol was astonished. "Jeer at me, my good M. Gevrol," he replied, "mock me without pity; you are right, I deserve it all."

"Ah, come now," said the chief, "have you then performed some new masterpiece, you impetuous old fellow?" Old Tabaret shook his head sadly. "I have delivered up an innocent man," he said, "and justice will not restore him his freedom."

Gevrol was delighted, and rubbed his hands until he almost wore away the skin. "This is fine," he sang out, "this is capital. To bring criminals to justice is of no account at all. But to free the innocent, by Jove! that is the last touch of art. Tirauclair, you are a great wonder; and I bow before you." And at the same time, he raised his hat ironically.

"Don't crush me," replied the old fellow. "Because chance served me three or four times, I became foolishly proud! Instead of laughing, pray help me, aid me with your advice and your experience. Alone, I can do nothing, while with your assistance—!" Gevrol was vain in the highest degree. Tabaret's submission tickled his pretensions as a detective immensely; for in reality he thought the old man very clever. He was softened. "I suppose," he said patronizingly, "you refer to the La Jonchere affair?"

"Alas! yes, my dear M. Gevrol, I wished to work without you, and I got myself into a pretty mess." Cunning old Tabaret kept his countenance as penitent as that of a sacristan caught eating meat on a Friday; but he was inwardly laughing and rejoicing all the while. "Conceited fool!" he thought, "I will flatter you so much that you will end by doing everything

I want." M. Gevrol rubbed his nose, put out his lower lip, and said, "Ah,—hem!" He pretended to hesitate; but it was only because he enjoyed prolonging the old amateur's discomfiture. "Come," said he at last, "cheer up, old Tirauclair. I'm a good fellow at heart, and I'll give you a lift. But, to-day, I'm too busy, I've an appointment to keep. Come to me to-morrow morning, and we'll talk it over. Do you know who that witness is that I've brought?"—"No; but tell me, my good M. Gevrol."—"Well, that fellow on the bench there, who is waiting for M. Daburon, is the husband of the victim of the La Jonchere tragedy!"—"Is it possible?" exclaimed old Tabaret, perfectly astounded. Then, after reflecting a moment, he added; "You are joking with me."—"No, upon my word. Go and ask him his name; he will tell you that it is Pierre Lerouge."—"She wasn't a widow then?"—"It appears not," replied Gevrol sarcastically, "since there is her happy spouse."—"Whew!" muttered the old fellow. "And does he know anything?" In a few sentences, the chief of detectives related to his amateur colleague the story that Lerouge was about to tell the investigating magistrate. "What do you say to that?" he asked when he came to the end.—"What do I say?" stammered M. Tabaret. "I don't say anything. But I think—no, I don't even think."—"A slight surprise, eh?" said Gevrol, beaming.—"Say rather an immense one," replied Tabaret. But suddenly he started, and gave his forehead a hard blow with his fist. "And my baker!" he cried, "I will see you to-morrow, then, M. Gevrol."—"He is crazed," thought the head detective. The old fellow was sane enough, but he had suddenly recollected the Asnieres baker, whom he had asked to call at his house. Would he still find him there? Going down stairs he met M. Daburon; but, as one has already seen, he hardly deigned to reply to him. He was soon outside, and trotted off along the quays. "Now," said he to himself, "let us consider. Noel is once more plain Noel Gerdy. He won't feel very pleased, for he thought so much of having a great name. Pshaw! if he likes, I'll adopt him. Tabaret doesn't sound so well as Commarin, but it's at least a name. Anyhow, Gevrol's story in no way affected Albert's situation or my convictions. He is the legitimate son, so much the better for him! That, however, would not prove his innocence to me, if I doubted it. He evidently knew nothing of these surprising circumstances, any more than his father. He must have believed as well as the

comte in the substitution having taken place. Madame Gerdy, too, must have been ignorant of these facts; they probably invented some story to explain the scar. Yes, but Madame Gerdy certainly knew that Noel was really her son, for when he was returned to her, she no doubt looked for the mark she had made on him. Then, when Noel discovered the comte's letters, she must have hastened to explain to him—" Old Tabaret stopped as suddenly as if further progress were obstructed by some dangerous reptile. He was terrified at the conclusion he had reached. "Noel, then, must have assassinated Widow Lerouge, to prevent her confessing that the substitution had never taken place, and have burned the letters and papers which proved it!" But he repelled this supposition with horror, as every honest man drives away a detestable thought which by accident enters his mind. "Suspect Noel, my boy, my sole heir, the personification of virtue and honor! Men of his class must indeed be moved by terrible passions to cause them to shed blood; and I have always known Noel to have but two passions, his mother and his profession. And I dare even to breathe a suspicion against this noble soul? I ought to be whipped!"

He at length reached the Rue St. Lazare. Before the door of his house stood a magnificent horse harnessed to an elegant blue brougham. At the sight of these he stopped. "A handsome animal!" he said to himself; "my tenants receive some swell people."

They apparently received visitors of an opposite class also, for, at that moment, he saw M. Clergot come out; worthy M. Clergot, whose presence in a house betrayed ruin just as surely as the presence of the undertakers announce a death. He stopped him and said. "Halloa! you old crocodile, you have clients, then, in my house?"

"So it seems," replied Clergot dryly.

"Who the deuce are you ruining now?"

"I am ruining no one," replied M. Clergot with an air of offended dignity. "Have you ever had reason to complain of me whenever we have done business together? I think not. Mention me to the young barrister up there if you like; he will tell you whether he has reason to regret knowing me."

These words produced a painful impression on Tabaret. What, Noel, the prudent Noel, one of Clergot's customers! What did it mean? Perhaps there was no harm in it; but

then he remembered the fifteen thousand francs he had lent Noel on the Thursday. "Yes," said he, wishing to obtain some more information, "I know that M. Gerdy spends a pretty round sum."

"It isn't he personally," Clergot objected, "who makes the money dance; it's that charming little woman of his. Ah, she's no bigger than your thumb, but she'd eat the devil, hoofs, horns, and all!"

What! Noel had a mistress, a woman whom Clergot himself, the friend of such creatures, considered expensive! The revelation, at such a moment, pierced the old man's heart. A gesture, a look, might awaken the usurer's mistrust, and close his mouth. "That's well known," replied Tabaret in a careless tone. "But what do you suppose the wench costs him a year?"

"Oh, I don't know! According to my calculation, she must have, during the four years that she has been under his protection, cost him close upon five hundred thousand francs."

Four years! Five hundred thousand francs! These words, these figures, burst like bombshells on old Tabaret's brain! Half a million! In that case, Noel was utterly ruined. But then—"It is a great deal," said he, succeeding by desperate efforts in hiding his emotion; "it is enormous. M. Gerdy, however, has resources."

"He!" interrupted the usurer, shrugging his shoulders. "Not even that!" he added, snapping his fingers; "he is utterly cleared out. But, if he owes you money, do not be anxious. He is a sly dog. He is going to be married; and I have just renewed bills of his for twenty-six thousand francs. Good-by, M. Tabaret."

The usurer hurried away, leaving the poor old fellow standing like a milestone in the middle of the pavement. And yet such was his confidence in Noel that he again struggled with his reason to resist the suspicions which tormented him. And supposing it were true? Have not many men done just such insane things for women without ceasing to be honest?

As he was about to enter his house a pretty young brunette came out and jumped as lightly as a bird into the blue brougham. Old Tabaret was a gallant man, and the young woman was most charming, but he never even looked at her. He passed in, and found his concierge standing, cap in hand, and tenderly examining a twenty-franc piece.

"Ah, sir," said the man, "such a pretty young person, and

so lady-like! If you had only been here five minutes sooner."—"What lady? why?"—"That elegant lady who just went out, sir; she came to make some inquiries about M. Gerdy. She gave me twenty francs for answering her questions. It seems that the gentleman is going to be married; and she was evidently much annoyed about it. Superb creature! I have an idea that she is his mistress. I know now why he goes out every night."—"M. Gerdy?"—"Yes, sir, but I never mentioned it to you because he seemed to wish to hide it. He never asks me to open the door for him, no, not he. He slips out by the little stable door. I have often said to myself: 'Perhaps he doesn't want to disturb me; it is very thoughtful on his part.'"

The concierge spoke with his eyes fixed on the gold piece. When he raised his head to examine the countenance of his lord and master, old Tabaret had disappeared.

Old Tabaret was running after the lady in the blue brougham. "She will tell me all," he thought, and with a bound he was in the street. He reached it just in time to see the blue brougham turn the corner of the Rue St. Lazare. "Heavens!" he murmured. "I shall lose sight of her, and yet she can tell me the truth." He ran to the end of the Rue St. Lazare as rapidly as if he had been a young man of twenty. Joy! He saw the blue brougham a short distance from him in the Rue du Havre, stopped in the midst of a block of carriages. "I have her," he said to himself. He looked all about him, but there was not an empty cab to be seen. The brougham got out of the entanglement and started off rapidly toward the Rue Tronchet. The old fellow followed. While running in the middle of the street, at the same time looking out for a cab, he kept saying to himself: "Hurry on, old fellow, hurry on."

But he was plainly losing ground. He was only half-way down the Rue Tronchet, and the brougham had almost reached the Madeleine. At last an open cab, going in the same direction as himself, passed by. He made a supreme effort, and with a bound jumped into the vehicle without touching the step. "There," he gasped, "that blue brougham, twenty francs!"

"All right!" replied the coachman, nodding.

As for old Tabaret, he was a long time recovering himself, his strength was almost exhausted. They were soon on the Boulevards. He stood up in the cab leaning against the driver's seat. "I don't see the brougham anywhere," he said.—"Oh, I see it all right, sir. But it is drawn by a splendid horse!"—

"Yours ought to be a better one. I said twenty francs; I'll make it forty." The driver whipped up his horse most mercilessly, and growled. "It's no use, I must catch her. Forty francs! I wonder how such an ugly man can be so jealous."

Old Tabaret tried in every way to occupy his mind with other matters. He wished to reflect before seeing the woman, speaking with her, and carefully questioning her. He was sure that by one word she would either condemn or save her lover. The idea that Noel was the assassin harassed and tormented him, and buzzed in his brain, like the moth which flies again and again against the window where it sees a light. As they passed the Chaussee d'Antin, the brougham was scarcely thirty paces in advance. The cab driver turned and said: "The brougham is stopping."—"Then stop also. Don't lose sight of it; but be ready to follow it again as soon as it goes off."

Old Tabaret leaned as far as he could out of the cab. The young woman alighted, crossed the pavement, and entered a shop where cashmeres and laces were sold. "There," thought the old fellow, "is where the thousand-franc notes go! Half a million in four years!

The cab moved on once more, but soon stopped again. The brougham had made a fresh pause, this time in front of a curiosity shop. "The woman wants to buy all Paris!" said old Tabaret to himself in a passion. "Yes, if Noel committed the crime, it was she who forced him to it. These are my fifteen thousand francs that she is frittering away now. It must have been for money, then, that Noel murdered Widow Lerouge. If so, he is the lowest, the most infamous of men! And to think that he would be my heir if I should die here of rage! For it is written in my will in so many words, 'I bequeath to my son, Noel Gerdy!' But is this woman never going home?" The woman was in no hurry. She visited three or four more shops, and at last stopped at a confectioner's, where she remained for more than a quarter of an hour. The old fellow, devoured by anxiety, moved about and stamped in his cab. He was dying to rush after her, to seize her by the arm, and cry out to her: "Don't you know that at this moment your lover, he whom you have ruined, is suspected of an assassination?"

She returned to her carriage. It started off once more, passed up the Rue de Faubourg Montmartre, turned into the Rue de

Provence, deposited its fair freight at her own door, and drove away.

Tabaret, with a sigh of relief, got out of the cab, gave the driver his forty francs, bade him wait, and followed in the young woman's footsteps. "The old fellow is patient," thought the driver; "and the little brunette is caught."

The detective opened the door of the concierge's lodge. "What is the name of the lady who just came in?" he demanded. The concierge did not seem disposed to reply. "Her name!" insisted the old man. The tone was so sharp, so imperative, that the concierge was upset. "Madame Juliette Chaffour," he answered.

"On what floor does she reside?"—"On the second, the door opposite the stairs."

A minute later the old man was waiting in Madame Juliette's drawing-room. Madame was dressing, the maid informed him, and would be down directly. Tabaret was astonished at the luxury of the room. There was nothing flaring or coarse, or in bad taste. The old fellow, who knew a good deal about such things, saw that everything was of great value. The ornaments on the mantelpiece alone must have cost, at the lowest estimate, twenty thousand francs. "Clergot," thought he, "didn't exaggerate a bit."

Juliette's entrance disturbed his reflections. She had taken off her dress and had hastily thrown about her a loose black dressing-gown, trimmed with cherry-colored satin.

"You wished, sir, to speak with me?" she inquired, bowing gracefully.—"Madame," replied M. Tabaret, "I am a friend of Noel Gerdy's; I may say, his best friend, and—"

"Pray sit down, sir," interrupted the young woman.

She placed herself on a sofa, just showing the tips of her little feet encased in slippers matching her dressing-gown, while the old man sat down in a chair. "I come, madame," he resumed, "on very serious business. Your presence at M. Gerdy's."—"Ah," cried Juliette, "he already knows of my visit? Then he must employ a detective."

"My dear child—" began Tabaret, paternally.—"Oh! I know, sir, what your errand is. Noel has sent you here to scold me. He forbade my going to his house, but I couldn't help it. It's annoying to have a puzzle for a lover, a man whom one knows nothing whatever about, a riddle in a black coat and a white cravat."

"You have been imprudent."—"Why? Because he is going to get married? Why does he not admit it then?"—"Suppose that it is not true."—"Oh, but it is! He told that old shark Clergot so, who repeated it to me. For the last month he has been so peculiar; he has changed so that I hardly recognize him."

Old Tabaret was especially anxious to know whether Noel had prepared an alibi for the evening of the crime. For him that was the grand question. If he had, he was certainly guilty; if not, he might still be innocent. Madame Juliette, he had no doubt, could enlighten him on that point. Consequently he had presented himself with his lesson all prepared, his little trap all set. The young woman's outburst disconcerted him a little; but trusting to the chances of conversation, he resumed. "Will you oppose Noel's marriage, then?"—"His marriage!" cried Juliette, bursting out into a laugh; "ah, the poor boy! If he meets no worse obstacle than myself, his path will be smooth. Let him marry by all means, the sooner the better, and let me hear no more of him."—"You don't love him, then?" asked the old fellow, surprised at this amiable frankness.

"Listen, sir. I have loved him a great deal, but everything has an end. For four years, I, who am so fond of pleasure, have passed an intolerable existence. If Noel doesn't leave me, I shall be obliged to leave him. I am tired of having a lover who is ashamed of me and who despises me."

"If he despises you, my pretty lady, he scarcely shows it here," replied old Tabaret, casting a significant glance about the room.

"You mean," she said, rising, "that he spends a great deal of money on me. It's true. He pretends that he has ruined himself on my account; it's very possible. But what's that to me! I would much have preferred less money and more regard. My extravagance has been inspired by anger and want of occupation. M. Gerdy treats me like a mercenary woman; and so I act like one. We are quits."

"You know very well that he worships you."—"He? I tell you he is ashamed of me. He hides me as though I were some horrible disease. You are the first of his friends to whom I have ever spoken. Why, no longer ago than last Tuesday, we went to the theatre! He hired an entire box. But do you think that he sat in it with me? Not at all. He slipped

away and I saw no more of him the whole evening."—"How so? Were you obliged to return home alone?"

"No. At the end of the play, toward midnight, he deigned to reappear. We had arranged to go to the masked ball at the Opera and then to have some supper. At the ball, he didn't dare to let down his hood, or take off his mask. At supper, I had to treat him like a perfect stranger, because some of his friends were present." This, then, was the alibi prepared in case of trouble. Juliette, had she been less carried away by her own feelings, would have noticed old Tabaret's emotion, and would certainly have held her tongue. He was perfectly livid, and trembled like a leaf. "Well," he said, making a great effort to utter the words, "the supper, I suppose, was none the less gay for that."

"Gay!" echoed the young woman, shrugging her shoulders; "you do not seem to know much of your friend. If you ever ask him to dinner, take good care not to give him anything to drink. Wine makes him as merry as a funeral procession. At the second bottle, he was more tipsy than a cork; so much so that he lost nearly everything he had with him: his overcoat, purse, umbrella, cigar-case—"

Old Tabaret couldn't sit and listen any longer; he jumped to his feet like a raving madman. "Miserable wretch!" he cried, "infamous scoundrel! It is he; but I have him!" And he rushed out, leaving Juliette so terrified that she called her maid. "Child," said she, "I have just made some awful blunder, have let some secret out. The old rogue was no friend of Noel's, he came to circumvent me, to lead me by the nose; and he succeeded. Without knowing it, I must have spoken against Noel. I have thought carefully, and can remember nothing; but he must be warned though. I will write him a line, while you find a messenger to take it."

Old Tabaret was soon in his cab and hurrying toward the Prefecture of Police. Noel an assassin! He thirsted for vengeance; he asked himself what punishment would be great enough for the crime. "For he not only assassinated Claudine," thought he, "but he so arranged the whole thing as to have an innocent man accused and condemned. And who can say that he did not kill his poor mother? It is clear that the wretch forgot his things at the railway station, in his haste to rejoin his mistress. If he has had the prudence to go boldly, and ask for them under a false name, I can see no further proofs against him.

The hussy, seeing her lover in danger, will deny what she has just told me: she will assert that Noel left her long after ten o'clock. But I can not think he has dared to go to the railway station again."

About half-way down the Rue Richelieu, M. Tabaret was seized with a sudden giddiness. "I am going to have an attack, I fear," thought he. "If I die, Noel will escape, and will be my heir. A man should always keep his will constantly with him, to be able to destroy it, if necessary."

A few steps further on, he saw a doctor's plate on a door; he stopped the cab, and rushed into the house. He was so excited, so beside himself, his eyes had such a wild expression, that the doctor was almost afraid of his peculiar patient, who said to him hoarsely: "Bleed me!" The doctor ventured an objection; but already the old fellow had taken off his coat, and drawn up one of his shirt-sleeves. "Bleed me!" he repeated. "Do you want me to die?" The doctor finally obeyed, and old Tabaret came out quieted and relieved.

An hour later, armed with the necessary power, and accompanied by a policeman, he proceeded to the lost property office at the St. Lazare railway station, to make the necessary search. He learned that, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday there had been found in one of the second-class carriages, of train No. 45, an overcoat and an umbrella. In one of the pockets of the overcoat he found a pair of lavender kid gloves, frayed and soiled, as well as a return ticket from Chatou, which had not been used. "Onward," he cried at last. "Now to arrest him." And, without losing an instant, he hastened to the Palais de Justice, where he hoped to find the investigating magistrate. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, M. Daburon was still in his office. He was conversing with the Comte de Commarin.

Old Tabaret entered like a whirlwind. "Sir," he cried, stuttering with suppressed rage, "we have discovered the real assassin! It is my adopted son, my heir, Noel! A warrant is necessary at once. If we lose a minute, he will slip through our fingers. He will know that he is discovered, if his mistress has time to warn him of my visit. Hasten, sir, hasten!" M. Daburon opened his lips to ask an explanation; but the old detective continued: "That is not all. An innocent man, Albert, is still in prison."

"He will not be so an hour longer," replied the magistrate; "a moment before your arrival, I had made arrangements to

have him released. We must now occupy ourselves with the other one." Neither old Tabaret nor M. Daburon had noticed the disappearance of the Comte de Commarin. On hearing Noel's name mentioned, he gained the door quietly, and rushed out into the passage.

XIX

NOEL had promised to use every effort, to attempt even the impossible, to obtain Albert's release. He in fact did interview the Public Prosecutor and some members of the bar, but managed to be repulsed everywhere. At four o'clock, he called at the Comte de Commarin's house, to inform his father of the ill success of his efforts. "The comte has gone out," said Denis; "but if you will take the trouble to wait."—"I will wait," answered Noel.—"Then," replied the valet, "will you please follow me? I have the comte's orders to show you into his private room."

This confidence gave Noel an idea of his new power. He was at home, henceforth, in that magnificent house, he was the master, the heir! His glance, which wandered over the entire room, noticed the genealogical tree, hanging on the wall. He approached it, and read. It was like a page, and one of the most illustrious, taken from the golden book of French nobility. A warm glow of pride filled the barrister's heart, his pulse beat quicker, he raised his head haughtily, as he murmured: "Vicomte de Commarin!" The door opened. He turned, and saw the comte entering. As Noel was about to bow respectfully, he was petrified by the look of hatred, anger, and contempt on his father's face, A shiver ran through his veins; his teeth chattered; he felt that he was lost.

"Wretch!" cried the comte. And, dreading his own violence, the old nobleman threw his cane into a corner. He was unwilling to strike his son; he considered him unworthy of being struck by his hand. Then there was a moment of mortal silence, which seemed to both of them a century. Noel had the courage to speak first. "Sir," he began.—"Silence!" exclaimed

the comte hoarsely. "Can it be that you are my son? Alas, I can not doubt it now! Wretch! you knew well that you were Madame Gerdy's son. Infamous villain! you not only committed this murder, but you did everything to cause an innocent man to be charged with your crime! Parricide! you have also killed your mother." The barrister attempted to stammer forth a protest. "You killed her," continued the comte with increased energy, "if not by poison, at least by your crime. I understand all now: she was not delirious this morning. But you know as well as I do what she was saying. You were listening, and, if you dared to enter at that moment when one word more would have betrayed you, it was because you had calculated the effect of your presence. It was to you that she addressed her last word: 'Assassin!'"

Little by little, Noel had retired to the end of the room, and he stood leaning against the wall, his head thrown back, his hair on end, his look haggard. His face betrayed a terror most horrible to see, the terror of the criminal found out.

"I know all, you see," continued the comte; "and I am not alone in my knowledge. At this moment, a warrant of arrest is issued against you." A cry of rage like a hollow rattle burst from the barrister's breast. His lips, which were hanging through terror, now grew firm. Overwhelmed in the very midst of his triumph, he struggled against this fright. He drew himself up with a look of defiance. M. de Commarin, without seeming to pay any attention to Noel, approached his writing-table, and opened a drawer. "My duty," said he, "would be to leave you to the executioner who awaits you; but I remember that I have the misfortune to be your father. Sit down; write and sign a confession of your crime. You will then find firearms in this drawer. May heaven forgive you!"

The old nobleman moved toward the door. Noel with a sign stopped him, and drawing at the same time a revolver from his pocket, he said: "Your firearms are needless, sir; my precautions, as you see, are already taken; they will never catch me alive. Only—"—"Only?" repeated the comte harshly.—"I must tell you, sir," continued the barrister coldly, "that I do not choose to kill myself—at least not at present."—"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin in disgust, "you are a coward!"—"No, sir, not a coward; but I will not kill myself until I am sure that every opening is closed against me, that I can not save myself."

"Miserable wretch!" said the comte, threateningly, "must I

then do it myself?" He moved toward the drawer, but Noel closed it with a kick. "Listen to me, sir," said he, in that hoarse, quick tone, which men use in moments of imminent danger, "do not let us waste in vain words the few moments' respite left me. I have committed a crime, it is true, and I do not attempt to justify it; but who laid the foundation of it, if not yourself? Now, you do me the favor of offering me a pistol. Thanks. I must decline it. This generosity is not through any regard for me. You only wish to avoid the scandal of my trial, and the disgrace which can not fail to reflect upon your name." The comte was about to reply. "Permit me," interrupted Noel imperiously. "I do not choose to kill myself; I wish to save my life, if possible. Supply me with the means of escape; and I promise you that I will sooner die than be captured. My last thousand-franc note was nearly all gone the day when—you understand me. Therefore, I say, give me some money."

"Never!"

"Then I will deliver myself up to justice, and you will see what will happen to the name you hold so dear!" The comte, mad with rage, rushed to his table for a pistol. Noel placed himself before him. "Oh, do not let us have any struggle," said he coolly; "I am the strongest." M. de Commarin recoiled. "Let us end this," he said in a tremulous voice, filled with the utmost contempt; "let us end this disgraceful scene. What do you demand of me?"

"I have already told you, money, all that you have here. But make up your mind quickly."—"I have eighty thousand francs here," he replied.—"That's very little," said the barrister; "but give them to me. I will tell you though that I had counted on you for five hundred thousand francs. If I succeed in escaping my pursuers, you must hold at my disposal the balance, four hundred and twenty thousand francs. Will you pledge yourself to give them to me at the first demand? At that price, you need never fear hearing of me again."

By way of reply, the comte opened a little iron chest imbedded in the wall, and took out a roll of bank-notes, which he threw at Noel's feet. "Will you give me your word," Noel continued, "to let me have the rest whenever I ask for them?"—"Yes."—"Then I am going. Do not fear, they shall not take me alive. Adieu, my father! in all this you are the true criminal. but you alone will go unpunished. Ah, heaven is not just. I curse you!"

When, an hour later, the servants entered the comte's room, they found him stretched on the floor with his face against the carpet, and showing scarcely a sign of life.

On leaving the Commarin house, Noel staggered up the Rue de l'Universite. It seemed to him that the pavement oscillated beneath his feet, and that everything about him was turning round. His mouth was parched, his eyes were burning, and every now and then a sudden fit of sickness overcame him. But, at the same time, strange to relate, he felt an incredible relief, almost delight. It was ended then, all was over; the game was lost. The fever which for the last few days had kept him up failed him now; and, with the weariness, he felt an imperative need of rest. For a moment he had serious thoughts of giving himself up, in order to secure peace, to gain quiet, to free himself from the anxiety about his safety. But he struggled against this dull stupor, and at last the reaction came, shaking off this weakness of mind and body. The consciousness of his position, and of his danger, returned to him. He foresaw, with horror, the scaffold, as one sees the depth of the abyss by the lightning flashes. "I must save my life," he thought; "but how?" That mortal terror which deprives the assassin of even ordinary common sense seized him. He began running in the direction of the Latin Quarter without purpose, without aim, running for the sake of running, to get away, like Crime, as represented in paintings, fleeing under the lashes of the Furies. He very soon stopped, however, for it occurred to him that this extraordinary behavior would attract attention. He walked along, instinctively repeating to himself: "I must do something." But he was so agitated that he was incapable of thinking or of planning anything. The police were seeking him, and he could think of no place in the whole world where he would feel perfectly safe. He was near the Odeon theatre, when a thought quicker than a flash of lightning lit up the darkness of his brain. It occurred to him that as the police were doubtless already in pursuit of him, his description would soon be known to every one, his white cravat and well-trimmed whiskers would betray him as surely as though he carried a placard stating who he was. Seeing a barber's shop, he hurried to the door; but, when on the point of turning the handle, he grew frightened. The barber might think it strange that he wanted his whiskers shaved off, and supposing he should question him! He passed on. He soon saw another

barber's shop, but the same fears as before again prevented his entering.

Gradually night had fallen, and, with the darkness, Noel seemed to recover his confidence and boldness. Why should he not save himself? He could go to a foreign country, change his name, begin his life over again, become a new man entirely. He had money, and that was the main thing. And, besides, as soon as his eighty thousand francs were spent, he had the certainty of receiving, on his first request, five or six times as much more. He was already thinking of the disguise he should assume, and of the frontier to which he should proceed, when the recollection of Juliette pierced his heart like a red-hot iron. Was he going to leave without her, going away with the certainty of never seeing her again? Was it possible? For whom then had he committed this crime? For her. Who would have reaped the benefits of it? She. Was it not just, then, that she should bear her share of the punishment? "She does not love me," thought the barrister bitterly; "she never loved me. She would be delighted to be forever free of me. Juliette is prudent; she has managed to save a nice little fortune. Grown rich at my expense, she will take some other lover. The voice of prudence cried out to him: "Unhappy man! to drag a woman along with you, and a pretty woman too, is but to stupidly attract attention upon you, to render flight impossible, to give yourself up like a fool."—"What of that?" replied passion. "We will be saved, or we will perish together. If she does not love me, I love her; I must have her! She will come, otherwise—"

But how to see Juliette, to speak with her, to persuade her. To go to her house was a great risk for him to run. The police were perhaps there already. "No," thought Noel; "no one knows that she is my mistress. It will not be found out for two or three days; and, besides, it would be more dangerous still to write."

He took a cab, and told the driver the number of the house in the Rue de Provence. Stretched on the cushions of the cab, lulled by its monotonous jolts, Noel passed involuntarily in review the events which had brought on and hastened the catastrophe. Just one month before, ruined, at the end of his expedients, and absolutely without resources, he had determined, cost what it might, to procure money, so as to be able to continue to keep Madame Juliette, when chance placed in his

hands Comte de Commarin's correspondence. Not only the letters read to old Tabaret, and shown to Albert, but also those which, written by the comte when he believed the substitution an accomplished fact, plainly established it. He believed himself the legitimate son, but his mother soon undeceived him, told him the truth, proved it to him by several letters she had received from Widow Lerouge, called on Claudine to bear witness to it, and demonstrated it to him by the scar he bore. Noel resolved to make use of the letters all the same. He attempted to induce his mother to leave the comte in his ignorance, so that he might thus blackmail him. But Madame Gerdy spurned the proposition with horror. Then the barrister made a confession of all his follies, showed himself in his true light, sunk in debt; and finally begged his mother to have recourse to M. de Commarin. This also she refused. It was then that the idea of murdering Claudine occurred to him. The unhappy woman had not been more frank with Madame Gerdy than with others, so that Noel really thought her a widow. Therefore, her testimony suppressed, who else stood in his way? Madame Gerdy, and perhaps the comte. He feared them but little. If Madame Gerdy spoke, he could always reply: "After stealing my name for your son, you will do everything in the world to enable him to keep it." But how do away with Claudine without danger to himself?

After long reflection, the barrister thought of a diabolical strategem. He burned all the comte's letters establishing the substitution, and he preserved only those which made it probable. These last he went and showed to Albert, feeling sure, that, should justice ever discover the reason of Claudine's death, it would naturally suspect him who appeared to have most interest in it. Not that he really wished Albert to be suspected of the crime; it was simply a precaution. His plan was simply this: the crime once committed, he would wait; things would take their own course, there would be negotiations, and ultimately he would compromise the matter at the price of a fortune. His plan settled, he decided to strike the fatal blow on the Shrove Tuesday. To neglect no precaution, he that very same evening took Juliette to the theatre, and afterward to the masked ball at the opera. In case things went against him, he thus secured an unanswerable alibi. The loss of his overcoat only troubled him for a moment. On reflection, he reassured himself, saying: "Pshaw! who will ever know?" Everything had resulted in

accordance with his calculations; it was, in his opinion, a matter of patience.

But when Madame Gerdy read the account of the murder, the unhappy woman divined her son's work, and, in the first paroxysms of her grief, she declared that she would denounce him. He was terrified. A frightful delirium had taken possession of his mother. One word from her might destroy him. Putting a bold face on it, however, he acted at once and staked his all.

To put the police on Albert's track was to guarantee his own safety, to insure to himself, in the event of a probable success, Count de Commarin's name and fortune. Circumstances, as well as his own terror, increased his boldness and his ingenuity. Old Tabaret's visit occurred just at the right moment. Noel knew of his connection with the police, and guessed that the old fellow would make a most valuable confidant. So long as Madame Gerdy lived, Noel trembled. In her delirium she might betray him at any moment. But when she had breathed her last, he believed himself safe. He thought it all over, he could see no further obstacle in his way; he made sure he had triumphed.

And now all was discovered, just as he was about to reach the goal of his ambition. But how? By whom? What fatality had resuscitated a secret which he had believed buried with Madame Gerdy? But where is the use, when one is at the bottom of an abyss, of knowing which stone gave way, or of asking down what side one fell?

The cab stopped in the Rue de Provence. Noel leaned out of the door, his eyes exploring the neighborhood and throwing a searching glance into the depths of the hall of the house. Seeing no one, he paid the fare through the front window, before getting out of the cab, and, crossing the pavement with a bound, he rushed upstairs. Charlotte, at sight of him, gave a shout of joy.

"At last it is you, sir!" she cried. "Ah, madame has been expecting you with the greatest impatience! She has been very anxious."

Juliette expecting him! Juliette anxious!

The barrister did not stop to ask questions. On reaching this spot, he seemed suddenly to recover all his composure. He understood his imprudence; he knew the exact value of every minute he delayed there. "If any one rings," said he to Char-

lotte, "don't open the door. No matter what may be said or done, don't open the door!"

On hearing Noel's voice, Juliette ran to meet him. He sharply pushed her back into the drawing-room, and followed, closing the door. Only then did she notice her lover's face. He was so changed, his look was so haggard that she could not help crying out: "What is the matter with you?"

Noel made no reply; he advanced toward her and took her hand. "Juliette," he demanded in a hollow voice, fixing his burning glance upon her, "Juliette, be sincere, do you love me?"

She guessed, she instinctively felt that something extraordinary was happening; she seemed to breathe an atmosphere of evil, yet she playfully replied, pouting her lips most provokingly: "You naughty boy, you deserve—"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Noel, stamping his feet fiercely. "Answer me," he continued, squeezing her pretty hands almost sufficiently to crush them, "yes, or no, do you love me?"

A hundred times had she played with her lover's anger, delighting to excite him into a fury, to enjoy the pleasure of appeasing him with a word, but she had never seen him thus before. He had hurt her very much, and yet she dared not complain of this his first harshness.

"Yes, I love you," she stammered, "do you not know it? Why do you ask me?"

"Why?" replied the barrister, releasing her hands; "why? Because, if you love me you have an opportunity of proving it. If you love me, you must follow me at once, abandon everything. Come, fly with me. Time presses—"

The young woman was decidedly frightened. "Great heavens!" she asked, "what has happened?"

"Nothing, except that I have loved you too much, Juliette. When I found I had no more money left to give you for your luxury, your caprices, I went mad. To procure money, I—I committed a crime—a crime; do you understand? The police are after me, I must fly, will you come with me?"

Juliette's eyes grew wide with astonishment; but she doubted Noel. "A crime? You?" she began.

"Yes, I! Would you know the truth? I have committed murder, I have assassinated! But it was all for you."

The barrister felt that at these words Juliette would certainly recoil from him in horror. He expected her to be seized by that terror which a murderer inspires. He was already fully

resigned to it. He thought that she would fly from him; perhaps there would be a scene. She might go into hysterics, cry out, call for help, for the police. He was mistaken. With a bound, Juliette threw herself upon him, entwining her arms about his neck, and embracing him as she had never done before.

"Yes, I love you!" she cried. "You have committed a crime for my sake, you? Then you must have loved me. You have a heart. I did not know you!"

It cost dear to inspire passion in Madame Juliette; but Noel did not think of that. He experienced a moment of intense delight; it seemed to him that nothing was hopeless. But he had the presence of mind to free himself from her embrace. "Let us go," he said; "the one great misfortune is that I do not know from whence the attack may come. How the truth has been discovered is still a mystery to me."

Juliette suddenly recollected the strange visit she had received in the afternoon; she understood it all. "Oh, wretched woman that I am!" she cried, wringing her hands in despair; "it is I who have betrayed you! It occurred on Tuesday, did it not?"

"Yes, Tuesday."

"Ah, then I have told all, without suspecting it, to your friend, that old fellow I thought you had sent, M. Tabaret!"

"What, Tabaret has been here?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Come, then," cried Noel, "come quickly; it's a miracle that he has not yet come to arrest me!"

He took her by the arm, to hurry her away; but she quickly released herself. "Wait," said she. "I have some money, some jewels. I must take them."

"It is useless. Leave everything behind. I have a fortune, Juliette; let us fly!"

She had already opened her jewel-box, and was throwing everything of value that she possessed pell-mell into a little traveling bag.

"Ah, through your delay I shall be caught," cried Noel, "I shall be caught!"

He spoke thus; but his heart was overflowing with joy: "What sublime devotion! She loves me truly," he said to himself; "for my sake, she renounces her happy life without hesitation; for my sake, she sacrifices all!"

Juliette had finished her preparations and was hastily tying on her bonnet, when the door-bell rang.

"It is the police!" cried Noel, becoming, if possible, even more livid.

The young woman and her lover stood as immovable as two statues, with great drops of perspiration on their foreheads, their eyes dilated, and their ears listening intently. A second ring was heard, then a third.

Charlotte appeared, walking on tiptoe. "There are several," she whispered; "I heard them talking together."

Grown tired of ringing, they knocked loudly on the door. The sound of a voice reached the drawing-room, and the word "law" was plainly heard.

"No more hope!" murmured Noel.

"Don't despair," cried Juliette; "try the servants' staircase!"

"You may be sure they have not forgotten it."

Juliette went to see, and returned dejected and terrified. She had distinguished heavy footsteps on the landing, made by some one endeavoring to walk softly. "There must be some way of escape!" she cried fiercely.

"Yes," replied Noel, "one way. I have given my word. They are picking the lock. Fasten all the doors, and let them break them down; it will give me time."

Juliette and Charlotte ran to carry out his directions. Then Noel, leaning against the mantelpiece, seized his revolver and pointed it at his breast. But Juliette, who had returned, perceiving the movement, threw herself upon her lover, but so violently that the revolver turned aside and went off. The shot took effect, the bullet entered Noel's stomach. He uttered a frightful cry. Juliette had made his death a terrible punishment; she had prolonged his agony. He staggered, but remained standing, supporting himself by the mantelpiece, while the blood flowed copiously from his wound.

Juliette clung to him, trying to wrest the revolver from his grasp. "You shall not kill yourself," she cried, "I will not let you. You are mine; I love you! Let them come. What can they do to you? If they put you in prison, you can escape. I will help you, we will bribe the jailers. Ah, we will live so happily together, no matter where, far away in America where no one knows us!"

The outer door had yielded; the police were now picking the lock of the door of the antechamber.

"Let me finish!" murmured Noel; "they must not take me alive!"

And, with a supreme effort, triumphing over his dreadful agony, he released himself, and roughly pushed Juliette away. She fell down near the sofa. Then he once more aimed his revolver at the place where he felt his heart beating, pulled the trigger and rolled to the floor. It was full time, for the police at that moment entered the room. Their first thought was that before shooting himself, Noel had shot his mistress. They knew of cases where people had romantically desired to quit this world in company; and, moreover, had they not heard two reports? But Juliette was already on her feet again.

"A doctor," she cried, "a doctor! He can not be dead!"

One man ran out, while the others, under old Tabaret's direction, raised the body and carried it to Madame Juliette's bedroom, where they laid it on the bed. "For his sake, I trust his wounds are mortal!" murmured the old detective, whose anger left him at the sight. "After all, I loved him as though he were my own child; his name is still in my will!"

Old Tabaret stopped. Noel just then uttered a groan and opened his eyes. "You see that he will live!" cried Juliette. The barrister shook his head feebly, and for a moment he tossed about painfully on the bed, passing his right hand first under his coat and then under his pillow. He even scucceeded in turning himself half-way toward the wall and back again. Upon a sign, which was at once understood, some one placed another pillow under his head. Then, in a broken, hissing voice, he uttered a few words: "I am the assassin," he said. "Write it down, I will sign it: it will please Albert. I owe him that at least."

While they were writing, he drew Juliette's head close to his lips. "My fortune is beneath the pillow," he whispered. "I give it all to you." A flow of blood rose to his mouth; and they all thought him dead. But he still had strength enough to sign his confession and to say jestingly to M. Tabaret: "Ah, ha, my friend, so you go in for the detective business, do you! It must be great fun to trap one's friends in person! Ah, I have had a fine game; but with three women in the play I was sure to lose."

The death struggle commenced, and, when the doctor arrived, he could only announce the decease of M. Noel Gerdy, barrister.

XX

SOME months later, one evening, at old Mademoiselle de Goello's house, the Marquise d'Arlange, looking ten years younger than when we saw her last, was giving her dowager friends an account of the wedding of her granddaughter Claire, who had just married the Vicomte Albert de Commarin. "The wedding," said she, "took place on our estate in Normandy, without any flourish of trumpets. My son-in-law wished it; for which I think he is greatly to blame. The scandal raised by the mistake of which he had been the victim, called for a brilliant wedding. That was my opinion, and I did not conceal it. But the boy is as stubborn as his father, which is saying a good deal; he persisted in his obstinacy. And my impudent granddaughter, obeying beforehand her future husband, also sided against me. It is, however, of no consequence; I defy any one to find to-day a single individual with courage enough to confess that he ever for an instant doubted Albert's innocence. I have left the young people in all the bliss of the honeymoon, billing and cooing like a pair of turtle-doves. It must be admitted that they have paid dearly for their happiness. May they be happy then, and may they have lots of children, for they will have no difficulty in bringing them up and in providing for them. I must tell you that, for the first time in his life, and probably for the last, the Comte de Commarin has behaved like an angel! He has settled all his fortune on his son, absolutely all. He intends living alone on one of his estates. I am afraid the poor dear old man will not live long. I am not sure that he has entirely recovered from that last attack. Anyhow, my grandchild is settled, and grandly too. I know what it has cost me, and how economical I shall have to be. But I do not think much of those parents who hesitate at any pecuniary sacrifice when their children's happiness is at stake." The marquise forgot, however, to state that, a week before the wedding, Albert freed her from a very embarrassing position, and had discharged a considerable amount of her debts.

Since then she had not borrowed more than nine thousand francs of him; but she intends confessing to him some day how greatly she is annoyed by her upholsterer, by her dressmaker, by three linen drapers, and by five or six other tradesmen. Ah, well, she is all the same a worthy woman: she never says anything against her son-in-law.

Retiring to his father's home in Poitou after sending in his resignation, M. Daburon has at length found rest; forgetfulness will come later on. His friends do not yet despair of inducing him to marry.

Madame Juliette is quite consoled for the loss of Noel. The eighty thousand francs hidden by him under the pillow were not taken from her. They are nearly all gone now though. Before long the sale of a handsome suite of furniture will be announced.

Old Tabaret, alone, is indelibly impressed. After having believed in the infallibility of justice, he now sees everywhere nothing but judicial errors. The ex-amateur detective doubts the very existence of crime, and maintains that the evidence of one's senses proves nothing. He circulates petitions for the abolition of capital punishment, and has organized a society for the defense of poor and innocent prisoners.

THE END

FILE NUMBER 113

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IN the Paris journals of February 28, 186--, there appeared the following intelligence:

"A daring robbery, committed during the night at one of our principal banker's, M. Andre Fauvel, has created great excitement this morning ir the neighborhood of the Rue de Provence. The thieves, who were as skilful as they were daring, succeeded in effecting an entrance to the bank, in forcing the lock of a safe that has heretofore been considered impregnable, and in possessing themselves of bank-notes of the value of three hundred and fifty thousand francs. The police, immediately informed of the robbery, displayed their accustomed zeal, and their efforts have been crowned with success. Already, it is said, P. B., a clerk in the bank, has been arrested, and there is every reason to hope that his accomplices will be speedily overtaken by the hand of justice."

For four days this robbery was the talk of Paris. Then public attention was engrossed by later and equally interesting events: an acrobat broke his leg at the circus; an actress made her debut at a minor theatre; and news of the 28th was soon forgotten.

But for once the newspapers were—perhaps designedly—wrong, or at least inaccurate in their information. The sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs had certainly been stolen from M. Andre Fauvel's bank, but not in the manner described. A clerk had also been arrested on suspicion, but no conclusive proof had been forthcoming against him. This robbery of unusual importance remained, if not inexplicable, at least unexplained.

The following are the facts of the case as related with scrupulous exactitude in the official police report.

II

THE banking-house of M. Andre Fauvel, No. 87 Rue de Provence, is a noted establishment, and, owing to its large staff of clerks, presents very much the appearance of a government department. On the ground-floor are the offices, with windows opening on the street, protected by iron bars sufficiently strong and close together to discourage all attempts at effecting an entrance. A large glass door opens into a spacious vestibule, where three or four messengers are always in waiting. On the right are the rooms to which the public is admitted, and from which a narrow passageway leads to the head cashier's office. The offices of the corresponding clerks, the ledger-keeper, and general accounts are on the left. At the farther end is a small glazed court with which seven or eight small wickets communicate. These are kept closed, except only on particular days when a considerable number of payments have to be made, and then they are indispensable. M. Fauvel's private office is on the first floor over the general offices, and leads into his handsome private apartments. This office communicates directly with the bank by means of a dark, narrow staircase, which opens into the room occupied by the head cashier. This latter room is completely proof against all burglarious attacks, no matter how ingeniously planned; indeed, it could almost withstand a regular siege, sheeted as it is like a monitor. The doors and the partition in which the wicket is where payments are made are covered with thick iron plates; and a heavy grating protects the fireplace. Fastened in the wall by enormous iron clamps is a safe, a formidable and fantastic piece of furniture, calculated to fill with envy the poor devil who carries his fortune easily enough in a pocket-book. This safe, considered the masterpiece of the well-known house of Becquet, is six feet in height and four and a half in width, and is made entirely of wrought iron, with triple sides, and divided into isolated compartments in case of fire.

The safe is opened by a curious little key, which is, however,

the least important part of the mechanism. Five movable steel buttons, upon which are engraved all the letters of the alphabet, constitute the real power of the ingenious lock. To open the safe it is requisite, before inserting the key, to replace the letters on the buttons in the same order in which they were when the door was locked. In M. Fauvel's bank, as elsewhere, it was always closed with a word that was changed from time to time. This word was known only to the head of the bank and the chief cashier, each of whom had a key to the safe. In such a stronghold, a person might deposit more diamonds than the Duke of Brunswick possessed, and sleep well assured, as he would be, of their safety. But one danger seemed to threaten —that of forgetting the secret word which was the "Open, sesame" of the iron barrier.

About half-past nine o'clock on the morning of the 28th of February, the bank clerks were all busy at their various desks, when a middle-aged man of dark complexion and military air, clad in deep mourning, appeared in the office adjoining that of the head cashier, and expressed a desire to see him.

He was told that the cashier had not arrived, and his attention was called to a placard in the entry, which stated that the cashier's office opened at ten o'clock.

This reply seemed to disconcert the newcomer. "I expected," he said, in a tone of cool impertinence, "to find some one here ready to attend to my business. I explained the matter to M. Fauvel yesterday. I am Comte Louis de Clameran, owner of iron-works at Oloron, and have come to receive three hundred thousand francs deposited in this bank by my late brother, whose heir I am. It is surprising that no instructions have been given about it."

Neither the title of the noble manufacturer nor his remarks appeared to have the slightest effect upon the clerks. "The head cashier has not yet arrived," they repeated, "and we can do nothing for you."

"Then conduct me to M. Fauvel."

There was a moment's hesitancy; then a clerk, named Cavaillon, who was writing by the window, said: "The chief is always out at this hour."

"I will call again, then," replied M. de Clameran. And he walked out, as he had entered, without saying "Good morning," or even raising his hat.

"Not overpolite, that customer," said little Cavaillon; "but he is unlucky, for here comes Prosper."

Prosper Bertomy, head cashier of Fauvel's banking-house, was a tall, handsome man, of about thirty, with fair hair and large dark blue eyes, fastidiously neat in appearance, and dressed in the height of fashion. He would have been very prepossessing but for a cold, reserved English-like manner, and a certain air of self-sufficiency, which spoiled his naturally bright and open countenance.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Cavaillon. "Some one has just been inquiring for you."

"Who? An ironmaster, was it not?"

"Precisely."

"Well, he will come again. Knowing that I should be late this morning, I made all my arrangements yesterday." Prosper had unlocked his office door, and, as he finished speaking, entered, and closed it behind him.

"Good!" exclaimed one of the clerks; "there is a man who never lets anything disturb him. The chief has quarreled with him twenty times for always coming late, and his remonstrances have no more effect upon him than a breath of wind."

"And quite right, too; he knows he can get anything he wants out of the chief."

"Besides, how could he come any sooner? A man who sits up all night, and leads a fast life, doesn't feel inclined for work early in the morning. Did you notice how pale he looked when he came in?"

"He must have been playing heavily again. Couturier says he lost fifteen hundred francs at a sitting last week."

"His work is none the worse done for all that," interrupted Cavaillon. "If you were in his place—"

He stopped short. The door of the cashier's office suddenly opened, and the cashier appeared before them with tottering step, and a wild, haggard look on his ashy pale face. "Robbed!" he gasped out; "I have been robbed!"

Prosper's horrified expression, his hollow voice and trembling limbs, so alarmed the clerks that they jumped off their stools and ran toward him. He almost dropped into their arms; he was sick and faint, and sank into a chair. His companions surrounded him, and begged him to explain himself. "Robbed?" they said; "where, how, by whom?"

Gradually, Prosper recovered himself. "All the money that was in the safe," he said, "has been stolen."

"All?"

"Yes, all; three rolls, each containing one hundred notes of a thousand francs, and one roll of fifty thousand. The four were wrapped in a sheet of paper and tied together."

With the rapidity of lightning, the news of the robbery spread throughout the banking-house, and the room was soon filled with curious inquirers.

"Tell us, Prosper," said young Cavaillon, "has the safe been broken open?"

"No; it is just as I left it."

"Well, then, how could—"

"All I know is that yesterday I placed three hundred and fifty thousand francs in the safe, and this morning they are gone."

A deep silence ensued, which was at length broken by an old clerk, who did not seem to share the general affright. "Don't distress yourself, M. Bertomy," he said; "no doubt the chief has disposed of the money."

The unhappy cashier started up with a look of relief; he eagerly caught at the suggestion. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "it must be as you say; the chief must have taken it." But, after thinking a few minutes, he remarked in a tone of deep depression: "No, that is impossible. During the five years I have had charge of the safe, M. Fauvel has never opened it excepting in my presence. Whenever he has needed money, he has either waited until I came, or has sent for me, rather than take it in my absence."

"Well," said Cavaillon, "before despairing, let us ascertain the truth."

But a messenger had already informed M. Fauvel of the robbery, and as Cavaillon was about to go in search of him, he entered the office.

M. Andre Fauvel appeared to be a man of fifty, inclined to corpulency, of medium height, with iron-gray hair; and, like all hard workers, he had a slight stoop. Never did he by a single action belie the kindly expression of his face. He had a frank air, a lively, intelligent eye, and full, red lips. Born in the neighborhood of Aix, he betrayed, when animated, a slight Provencal accent that gave a peculiar flavor to his genial humor. The news of the robbery had extremely agitated him, for his usually florid face was now quite pale. "What is this

I hear? what has happened?" he said to the clerks, who respectfully stood aside when he entered the office.

The sound of M. Fauvel's voice inspired the cashier with the factitious energy called forth by a great crisis. The dreaded and decisive moment had come; he arose, and advanced toward his chief. "Sir," he said, "having, as you know, a payment to make this morning, I yesterday drew from the Bank of France three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"Why yesterday?" interrupted the banker. "I think I have a hundred times desired you to wait until the day payment has to be made."

"I know it, sir, and I did wrong to disobey you. But the mischief is done. Yesterday evening I locked the money up: it has disappeared, and yet the safe has not been broken open."

"You must be mad!" exclaimed M. Fauvel; "you are dreaming!"

These few words crushed all hope; but the horror of the situation imparted to Prosper, not the coolness of a steadied resolution, but that sort of stupid, stolid indifference which often results from unexpected catastrophes. It was with apparent calmness that he replied: "I am not mad; neither, unfortunately, am I dreaming; I am simply telling the truth."

This tranquillity at such a moment appeared to exasperate M. Fauvel. He seized Prosper by the arm, and shook him roughly. "Speak!" he exclaimed; "speak! who can have opened the safe?"

"I can not say."

"No one but you and I knows the secret word. No one but you and I possesses a key."

This was a formal accusation; at least, all the auditors present so understood it. Yet Prosper's strange calmness never left him for an instant. He quietly released himself from M. Fauvel's grasp, and slowly said: "In other words, sir, it is only I who could have taken this money—"

"Miserable man!" exclaimed M. Fauvel.

Prosper drew himself up to his full height, and, looking M. Fauvel full in the face, added: "Or you!"

The banker made a threatening gesture; and there is no knowing what would have happened if he had not been interrupted by loud and angry voices in the hall. A man insisted upon entering despite the protestations of the messengers, and succeeded in forcing his way in. It was M. de Clameran.

The clerks stood looking on, bewildered and inert. The silence was profound and solemn. It was easy to perceive that some terrible issue was being anxiously weighed by all these men.

The ironmaster did not appear to observe anything unusual. He advanced, and without lifting his hat said, in his former impertinent tone: "It is after ten o'clock, gentlemen."

No one answered; and M. de Clameran was about to continue, when turning round, he for the first time saw the banker, and, walking up to him, exclaimed: "Well, sir, I congratulate myself upon finding you in at last. I have been here once before this morning, and found the cashier's office not opened, the cashier not arrived, and you absent."

"You are mistaken, sir, I was in my office."

"At any rate, I was told you were out; that gentleman there assured me of the fact." And the ironmaster pointed out Cavaillon. "However, that is of little importance," he went on to say. "I return, and this time not only the cashier's office is closed, but I am refused admittance to the banking-house, and find myself compelled to force my way in. Be so good as to tell me whether I can have my money."

M. Fauvel's pale face turned red with anger as he listened to this harangue; yet he controlled himself. "I should be obliged to you, sir," he said in a low voice, "for a short delay."

"I thought you told me—"

"Yes, yesterday. But this morning—this very instant—I find I have been robbed of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

M. de Clameran bowed ironically, and asked: "Shall I have to wait long?"

"Long enough for me to send to the Bank of France."

Then, turning his back on the iron-founder, M. Fauvel said to his cashier: "Write a check and send to the bank at once to draw out all the available money. Let the messenger take a cab." Prosper remained motionless. "Do you hear me?" inquired the banker in an angry voice.

The cashier started; he seemed as if awakening from a dream. "It is useless to send," he said in a slow, measured tone: "this gentleman requires three hundred thousand francs, and there is less than one hundred thousand at the bank."

M. de Clameran appeared to expect this answer, for he muttered: "Of course." Although he only pronounced these words, his voice, his manner, his countenance clearly said: "This

comedy is well acted; but nevertheless it is a comedy, and I don't intend to be duped by it."

Alas! After Prosper's answer, and the ironmaster's coarsely expressed opinion, the clerks knew not what to think. The fact was, that Paris had just been startled by several financial crashes. The thirst for speculation had caused the oldest and stanchest houses to totter. Men of the most unimpeachable honor had to sacrifice their pride, and go from door to door imploring aid. Credit, that rare bird of security and peace, rested with none, but stood, with upraised wings, ready to fly off at the first suggestion of suspicion.

This idea of a comedy arranged beforehand between the banker and his cashier might therefore readily occur to the minds of people who, if not suspicious, were at least aware of all the expedients resorted to by speculators in order to gain time, which with them often meant salvation.

M. Fauvel had had too much knowledge of mankind not to instantly divine the impression produced by Prosper's answer; he read the most mortifying doubt on the faces around him. "Don't be alarmed, sir," said he to M. de Clameran, "this house has other resources. Be kind enough to await my return."

He left the office, went up to his private room, and in a few minutes returned, holding in his hand a letter and a bundle of securities. "Here, quick, Couturier!" he said to one of his clerks, "take my carriage, which is waiting at the door, and go with this gentleman to M. de Rothschild. Hand the latter this letter and these securities; in exchange, you will receive three hundred thousand francs, which give to M. de Clameran."

The ironmaster was visibly disappointed; he seemed desirous of apologizing for his rudeness. "I assure you," said he to M. Fauvel, "that I had no intention of giving offense. Our relations, for some years, have been such that I hope—"

"Enough, sir," interrupted the banker, "I desire no apologies. In business, friendship counts for nothing. I owe you money: I am not ready to pay: you are pressing: you have a perfect right to demand what is your own. Accompany my messenger: he will pay you your money." Then he turned to his clerks, who stood curiously gazing on, and said: "As for you, gentlemen, be good enough to resume your places at your desks."

In an instant the office was cleared of every one excepting the clerks who habitually occupied it; and they resumed their seats at their desks with their noses almost touching the paper

before them, as if they were too engrossed in their work to think of anything else.

Still excited by the events which had rapidly succeeded each other, M. Andre Fauvel walked up and down the room with quick, nervous steps, occasionally uttering some half-stifled exclamation. Prosper had remained leaning against the partition, with pale face and fixed eyes, looking as if he had lost the faculty of thinking or of acting. Presently the banker, after a long silence, stopped short before him; he had determined upon the line of conduct he would pursue. "We must have an explanation," he said. "Go into your office."

The cashier mechanically obeyed; and his chief followed him, taking the precaution to close the door after them. The room bore no evidences of a successful burglary. Everything was in perfect order; not even a paper was disturbed. The safe was open, and on the top shelf lay several rouleaus of gold, overlooked or disdained by the thieves.

M. Fauvel, without troubling himself to examine anything, took a seat, and ordered his cashier to do the same. He had quite recovered his equanimity, and his countenance wore its usual kind expression. "Now that we are alone, Prosper," he said, "have you nothing to tell me?"

The cashier started, as if surprised at the question. "Nothing, sir, that I have not already told you," he replied.

"What! nothing? Do you persist in maintaining an attitude so absurd and ridiculous that no one can possibly give you credence? It is sheer folly? Confide in me: it is your only chance of salvation. I am your employer, it is true; but I am before and above all your friend—your best and truest friend. I can not forget that in this very room, fifteen years ago, you were intrusted to me by your father; and ever since that day I have had cause to congratulate myself on possessing so faithful and efficient a clerk. Yes, it is fifteen years since you came to me. I was then just commencing the foundation of my fortune. You have seen it gradually grow, step by step, from almost nothing to its present magnitude. As my wealth increased, I endeavored to better your condition; you who, although so young, are the oldest of my clerks. At each augmentation of my fortune I increased your salary."

Never had the cashier heard M. Fauvel express himself in so feeling and paternal a manner. Prosper was silent with astonishment.

"Answer," persued M. Fauvel, "have I not always been like a father to you? From the first day, my house has been open to you; you were treated as a member of my family; my niece Madeleine and my sons looked upon you as a brother. But you grew weary of this peaceful life. One day, a year ago, you suddenly began to shun us; and since then—"

The memories of the past thus called up by the banker seemed too much for the unhappy cashier; he buried his face in his hands, and wept bitterly.

"A man can confide everything to his father," resumed M. Fauvel, also deeply affected. "Fear nothing. A father not only pardons, he forgets. Do I not know the temptations that beset a young man in a city like Paris? There are some inordinate desires before which the firmest principles will give way, and which so pervert our moral sense as to render us incapable of judging between right and wrong. Speak, Prosper, speak!"

"What do you wish me to say?"

"The truth. When an honorable man yields, in an hour of weakness, to temptation, his first step toward atonement is confession. Say to me: 'Yes, I have been tempted, dazzled: the sight of these piles of gold turned my brain. I am young: I have passions.'"

"I!" murmured Prosper, "I!"

"Poor boy," said the banker sadly; "do you think I am ignorant of the life you have been leading since you left my roof a year ago? Can you not understand that all your fellow clerks are jealous of you? that they do not forgive you for earning twelve thousand francs a year? Never have you committed a piece of folly without my being immediately informed of it by an anonymous letter. I could tell you the exact number of nights you have spent at the gaming-table, and the money you have squandered. Oh, envy has keen eyes and a quick ear! I have great contempt for these cowardly denunciations, but was forced, not only to heed them, but to make inquiries myself. It is only proper that I should know what sort of life is led by the man to whom I intrust my fortune and my honor."

Prosper seemed about to protest against this last speech.

"Yes, my honor," insisted M. Fauvel, in a voice that a sense of humiliation made unsteady; "yes, my credit, which might have been compromised to-day by this M. de Clameran. Do you know how much I shall lose by paying him this money? And suppose I had not had the securities which I have sacrificed? you did not know I possessed them."

The banker paused, as if hoping for a confession, which, however, did not come.

"Come, Prosper, have courage, be frank! I will go upstairs. You will look again in the safe; I am sure that in your agitation you did not search it thoroughly. This evening I will return, and I am confident that, during the day, you will have found, if not the three hundred and fifty thousand francs, at least the greater portion of the amount; and to-morrow neither you nor I will remember anything about this false alarm."

M. Fauvel had risen, and was about to leave the room when Prosper arose, and seized him by the arm. "Your generosity is useless, sir," he said bitterly; "having taken nothing I can restore nothing. I have made a scrupulous search; the bank-notes have been stolen."

"But by whom, poor fool? by whom?"

"By all that is sacred, I swear that it was not by me."

The banker's face turned crimson. "Miserable wretch!" cried he, "do you mean to say that I took the money?"

Prosper bowed his head, and did not answer.

"Ah! it is thus, then," said M. Fauvel, unable to contain himself any longer, "you dare— Then between you and me, M. Prosper Bertomy, justice shall decide. God is my witness that I have done all I could to save you. You will have yourself to thank for what follows. I have sent for the commissary of police; he must be waiting in my room. Shall I call him down?"

Prosper, with the fearful resignation of a man who entirely abandons himself, replied in a stifled voice: "Do as you will."

The banker was near the door, which he opened, and, after giving the cashier a last searching look, called to an office boy: "Anselm, bid the commissary of police to step down."

III

IF there is one man in the world whom no event should move or surprise, always on his guard against deceptive appearances, capable of admitting everything and explaining everything, it certainly is a Parisian commissary of police.

While the judge, from his lofty seat, applies the Code to the facts submitted to him, the commissary of police observes and watches all the odious circumstances the law can not reach. He is, in spite of himself, the confidant of disgraceful details, domestic crimes, and tolerated vices.

If, when he entered upon his office, he had any illusions, before the end of a year they would all be dissipated. If he does not absolutely despise the human race, it is because often, side by side with abominations indulged in with impunity, he discovers sublime generosities which remain unrewarded. He sees impudent villains filching the public respect; and he consoles himself by thinking of the modest, obscure heroes whom he has also encountered.

So often have his forecasts been deceived, that he has reached a state of complete skepticism. He believes in nothing, neither in evil nor in absolute good; not more in virtue than in vice. His experience has forced him to come to the drear conclusion, that not men, but events, are worth considering.

The commissary sent for by M. Fauvel soon made his appearance. It was with a calm air, if not one of perfect indifference, that he entered the office. He was followed by a short man dressed in a full suit of black, which was slightly relieved by a ruffled collar.

The banker, scarcely bowing, said to the commissary: "Doubtless, sir, you have been apprised of the painful circumstances which compel me to have recourse to your assistance?"

"It is about a robbery, I believe."

"Yes; an infamous and mysterious robbery committed in this office, from the safe you see open there, of which my cashier" (he pointed to Prosper) "alone possesses the key and the word."

This declaration seemed to arouse the unfortunate cashier from his dull stupor. "Excuse me, sir," he said to the commissary in a low tone. "My chief also has the word and the key."

"Of course, that is understood."

The commissary at once drew his own conclusions. Evidently these two men accused each other. From their own statements, one or the other was guilty. One was the head of an important bank; the other was simply the cashier. One was the chief; the other the clerk. But the commissary of police was too well skilled in concealing his impressions to betray his thoughts by any visible sign. Not a muscle of his face moved. Yet he

became more grave, and alternately watched the cashier and M. Fauvel, as if trying to draw some satisfactory conclusion from their behavior.

Prosper was very pale and dejected. He had dropped into a seat, and his arms hung inert on either side of the chair. The banker, on the contrary, remained standing with flashing eyes and crimson face, expressing himself with extraordinary vehemence. "The importance of the theft is immense," continued he; "there is missing a fortune, three hundred and fifty thousand francs! This robbery might have had the most disastrous consequences. In times like these, the want of this sum might compromise the credit of the wealthiest banking-house in Paris."

"I believe so, if bills were falling due."

"Well, sir, I have this very day a heavy payment to make."

"Ah, really!" There was no mistaking the commissary's tone; a suspicion, the first, had evidently entered his mind.

The banker understood it; he started, and added quickly: "I met my engagements, but at the cost of a disagreeable sacrifice. I ought to add further, that if my orders had been obeyed, the three hundred and fifty thousand francs would not have been here."

"How is that?"

"I desire never to have large sums of money in my house overnight. My cashier had positive orders invariably to wait until the last moment before drawing money from the Bank of France. I forbade him, above all, to leave large sums of money in the safe overnight."

"You hear this?" said the commissary to Prosper.

"Yes, sir," replied the cashier, "M. Fauvel's statement is quite correct."

After this explanation, the suspicions of the commissary, instead of being strengthened, were dissipated. "Well," he said, "a robbery has been perpetrated, but by whom? Did the robber enter from without?"

The banker hesitated a moment. "I think not," he said at last.

"And I am certain he did not," said Prosper.

The commissary expected and was prepared for these answers; but it did not suit his purpose to follow them up immediately. "However," said he, "we must make ourselves sure of it." Turning toward his companion—"M. Fanferlot," he said, "go and see if you can discover any traces that may have escaped the attention of these gentlemen."

M. Fanferlot, nicknamed "the squirrel," was indebted to his prodigious agility for his title, of which he was not a little proud. Slim and insignificant in appearance, in spite of his iron muscles, he might be taken for the under clerk of a bailiff as he walked along buttoned up to the chin in his thin black overcoat. He had one of those faces that impress one disagreeably—an odiously turned-up nose, thin lips, and little restless black eyes.

Fanferlot, who had been in the detective force for five years, burned to distinguish himself. He was ambitious. Alas! he was unsuccessful, lacking opportunity—or genius. Already, before the commissary spoke to him, he had ferreted everywhere; studied the doors, sounded the partitions, examined the wicket, and stirred up the ashes in the grate. "I can not imagine," said he, "how a stranger could have effected an entrance here." He walked round the office. "Is this door closed at night?" he inquired.

"It is always locked."

"And who keeps the key?"

"The watchman," said Prosper, "to whom I always gave it in charge before leaving the bank."

"And who," said M. Fauvel, "sleeps in the outer room on a folding-beadstead, which he unfolds at night, and folds up in the morning."

"Is he here now?" inquired the commissary.

"Yes," replied the banker, and he opened the door, and called: "Anselme!"

This man was the favored servant of M. Fauvel, and had lived with him for ten years. He knew that he would not be suspected; but the idea of being connected in any way with a robbery was too much for him, and he entered the door trembling like a leaf.

"Did you sleep in the next room last night?" asked the commissary.

"Yes, sir, as usual."

"At what hour did you go to bed?"

"About half-past ten; I had spent the evening at a cafe near by, with master's valet."

"Did you hear no noise during the night?"

"Not a sound; and still I sleep so lightly, that if M. Fauvel comes down to the cashier's office when I am asleep, I am instantly aroused by the sound of his footsteps."

"M. Fauvel often comes to the cashier's office at night, does he?"

"No, sir; very seldom."

"Did he come last night?"

"No, sir, I am very certain he did not; for I was kept awake nearly all night by the strong coffee I had drunk with the valet."

"That will do; you can retire," said the commissary.

When Anselme had left the room, Fanferlot resumed his search. He opened the door of the private staircase. "Where do these stairs lead to?" he asked.

"To my private office," replied M. Fauvel.

"Is not that the room whither I was conducted when I first arrived?" inquired the commissary.

"The same."

"I should like to see it," said Fanferlot, "and examine the entrance to it."

"Nothing is easier," said M. Fauvel eagerly; "follow me, gentlemen. And you too, Prosper."

M. Fauvel's private office consisted of two rooms, the waiting-room, sumptuously furnished and elaborately decorated, and the inner one where he transacted business. The furniture in this room was composed of a large office-table, several leather-covered chairs, and on either side of the fireplace a secretary and a bookshelf.

These two rooms had only three doors; one opened on the private staircase, another into the banker's bedroom, and the third on to the landing. It was through this latter door that the banker's clients and visitors were admitted.

M. Fanferlot examined the room at a glance. He seemed puzzled, like a man who had flattered himself with the hope of discovering some clue and had found nothing. "Let us see the other side," he said. He passed into the waiting-room, followed by the banker and the commissary of police.

Prosper remained behind. Despite the confused state of his mind, he could not but notice that the situation was for him momentarily becoming more serious. He had demanded and accepted the contest with his chief; the struggle had commenced, and now it no longer depended upon his own will to arrest the consequences of his action. They were about to engage in a bitter conflict, utilizing all weapons, until one of the two should succumb, the loss of honor being the price of defeat.

In the eyes of justice who would be the innocent man? Alas! the unfortunate cashier saw only too clearly that the chances were terribly unequal, and he was overwhelmed with the sense of his own inferiority. Never had he thought that his chief would carry out his threats; for in a contest of this nature, M. Fauvel would have as much at stake as his cashier, and more to lose.

Prosper was sitting near the fireplace, absorbed in the most gloomy forebodings, when the banker's bedroom door suddenly opened, and a lovely girl appeared upon the threshold. She was tall and slender; a loose morning robe, confined at the waist by a simple black ribbon, betrayed to advantage the graceful elegance of her figure. Her dark eyes were large and soft; her complexion had the creamy pallor of a white camellia; and her beautiful black hair, carelessly held together by a tortoise-shell comb, fell in a profusion of soft curls upon her finely shaped neck. She was Madeleine, M. Fauvel's niece, of whom he had spoken not long before. Seeing Prosper in the room, where probably she had expected to find her uncle alone, she could not refrain from an exclamation of surprise: "Ah!"

Prosper started up as if he had received an electric shock. His eyes, a moment before so dull and heavy, now sparkled with joy, as if he had caught a glimpse of an angel of hope. "Madeleine!" he cried, "Madeleine!"

The young girl was blushing crimson. She seemed about to hastily retreat, and stepped back; but Prosper having advanced toward her, she was overcome by a sentiment stronger than her will, and extended her hand, which he took and pressed with great respect. They stood thus face to face, but with averted looks, as if they dared not let their eyes meet for fear of betraying their feelings; having much to say, and not knowing how to begin, they stood silent. Finally Madeleine murmured in a scarcely audible voice: "You, Prosper—you!"

These words broke the spell. The cashier dropped the white hand which he held, and answered bitterly: "Yes, I am Prosper, the companion of your childhood—suspected, accused of the most disgraceful theft; Prosper, whom your uncle has just delivered up to justice, and who, before the day has gone by, will be arrested and thrown into prison."

Madeleine, with a terrified gesture, cried in a tone of anguish: "Good heavens! Prosper, what are you saying?"

"What! mademoiselle, do you not know what has happened? Have not your aunt and cousins told you?"

"They have told me nothing. I have scarcely seen my cousins this morning; and my aunt is so ill that I felt uneasy, and came to tell my uncle. But for heaven's sake, speak: tell me the cause of your distress."

Prosper hesitated. Perhaps it occurred to him to open his heart to Madeleine, of revealing to her his most secret thoughts. A remembrance of the past checked his confidence. He sadly shook his head, and replied: "Thanks, mademoiselle, for this proof of interest, the last, doubtless, that I shall ever receive from you; but allow me, by being silent, to spare you distress, and myself the mortification of blushing before you."

Madeleine interrupted him imperiously: "I insist upon knowing," she said.

"Alas! mademoiselle," answered Prosper, "you will only too soon learn my misfortune and disgrace; then, yes then, you will applaud yourself for what you have done."

She became more urgent; instead of commanding she entreated; but Prosper was inflexible. "Your uncle is in the adjoining room, with the commissary of police and a detective," said he. "They will soon return. I entreat you to retire that they may not find you here." As he spoke he gently pushed her through the door, and closed it upon her.

It was time, for the next moment the commissary and M. Fauvel entered. They had visited the main entrance and the waiting-room, and had heard nothing of what had passed. But Fanferlot had heard for them. This excellent bloodhound had not lost sight of the cashier. He said to himself: "Now that my young gentleman believes himself to be alone, his face will betray him. I shall detect a smile or a gesture that will enlighten me."

Leaving M. Fauvel and the commissary to pursue their investigations, he posted himself to watch. He saw the door open, and Madeleine appear upon the threshold; he lost not a single word or gesture of the rapid scene which had passed. It mattered little that every word of this scene was an enigma. M. Fanferlot was skilful enough to complete the sentences he did not understand. As yet he only had a suspicion; but a mere suspicion is better than nothing; it is a point to start from. So ready was he in building a plan upon the slightest incident, that he thought he saw in the past of these people,

who were utter strangers to him, glimpses of a domestic drama. If the commissary of police is a skeptic, the detective has faith, he believes in evil. "I understand the case now," said he to himself. "This man loves the young lady, who is really very pretty; and, as he is handsome, I suppose his love is reciprocated. This love affair vexes the banker, who, not knowing how to get rid of the importunate lover by fair means, has to resort to foul, and plans this imaginary robbery, which is very ingenious."

Thus, to M. Fanferlot's mind, the banker had simply robbed himself, and the innocent cashier was the victim of a vile machination. But this conviction was at present of little service to Prosper. Fanferlot, the ambitious man, who had determined to obtain renown in his profession, decided to keep his conjectures to himself. "I will let the others go their way, and I'll go mine," he said. "When, by dint of close watching and patient investigation, I shall have collected proof sufficient to insure certain conviction I will unmask the scoundrel."

He was radiant. He had at last found the crime, so long looked for, which would make him celebrated. Nothing was wanting, neither the odious circumstances, nor the mystery, nor even the romantic and sentimental element represented by Prosper and Madeleine. Success seemed difficult, almost impossible; but Fanferlot, "the squirrel," had great confidence in his own genius for investigation.

Meanwhile, the search upstairs was completed, and every one had returned to Prosper's office. The commissary, who had seemed so calm when he first came, now looked grave and perplexed. The moment for taking a decisive part had come, yet it was evident that he hesitated. "You see, gentlemen," he began, "our search has only confirmed our first opinion." M. Fauvel and Prosper bowed assentingly.

"And what do you think, M. Fanferlot?" continued the commissary. Fanferlot did not answer. Occupied in studying the lock of the safe, he manifested signs of a lively surprise. Evidently he had just made an important discovery. M. Fauvel, Prosper, and the commissary rose, and surrounded him.

"Have you discovered any trace?" asked the banker eagerly.

Fanferlot turned round with a vexed air. He reproached himself for not having concealed his impressions. "Oh!" said he carelessly, "I have discovered nothing of importance."

"But we should like to know," said Prosper.

"I have merely convinced myself that this safe has been recently opened or shut, I know not which, with some violence and haste."

"How so?" asked the commissary, becoming attentive.

"Look, sir, at this scratch near the lock."

The commissary stooped down, and carefully examined the safe; he saw a slight scratch several inches long that had removed the outer coat of varnish. "I see the scratch," said he, "but what does it prove?"

"Oh, nothing at all!" said Fanferlot "I just now told you it was of no importance."

Fanferlot said this, but it was not his real opinion. This scratch, undeniably fresh, had for him a signification that escaped the others. He said to himself: "This confirms my suspicions. If the cashier had stolen millions, there was no occasion for his being in a hurry; whereas the banker creeping down in the dead of the night with furtive footsteps, for fear of awakening the man in the outer room, in order to rifle his own safe, had every reason to tremble, to hurry, to hastily withdraw the key, which, slipping out of the lock, scratched off the varnish."

Resolved to unravel alone the tangled thread of this mystery, the detective determined to keep his conjectures to himself; for the same reason he was silent as to the interview which he had witnessed between Madeleine and Prosper. He hastened to withdraw attention from the scratch upon the lock. "To conclude," he said, addressing the commissary, "I am convinced that no one outside of the bank could have obtained access to this room. The safe, moreover, is intact. No suspicious pressure has been used on the movable buttons. I can assert that the lock has not been tampered with by burgulars' tools or false keys. Those who opened the safe knew the word, and possessed the key."

This formal affirmation of a man whom he knew to be skilful ended the hesitation of the commissary. "That being the case," he replied, "I must request a few moments' conversation with M. Fauvel."

"I am at your service," said the banker.

Prosper foresaw the result of this conversation. He quietly placed his hat on the table to show that he had no intention of attempting to escape, and passed into the adjoining office. Fanferlot also went out, but not before the commissary had

made him a sign, and received one in return. This sign signified, "You are responsible for this man."

The detective needed no hint to make him keep a strict watch. His suspicions were too vague, his desire for success was too ardent, for him to lose sight of Prosper an instant. Closely following the cashier, he seated himself in a dark corner of the office, and, pretending to be sleepy, he fixed himself in a comfortable position for taking a nap, gaped until his jawbone seemed about to be dislocated, then closed his eyes and kept perfectly quiet.

Prosper took a seat at the desk of an absent clerk. The others were burning to know the result of the investigation; their eyes shone with curiosity, but they dared not ask a question. Unable to restrain himself any longer, little Cavaillon, Prosper's defender, ventured to say: "Well, who stole the money?"

Prosper shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody knows," he replied.

Was this conscious innocence or hardened recklessness? The clerks observed with bewildered surprise that Prosper had resumed his usual manner—that sort of icy haughtiness that kept people at a distance, and made him so unpopular in the bank. Save the deathlike pallor of his face, and the dark circles around his swollen eyes, he bore no traces of the pitiable agitation he had exhibited not long before. Never would a stranger entering the office have supposed that this young man, idly lounging in a chair and toying with a pencil, was resting under an accusation of robbery, and was about to be arrested. He soon stopped playing with the pencil, and drew toward him a sheet of paper upon which he hastily wrote a few lines.

"Ah, ha!" thought Fanferlot, the squirrel, whose hearing and sight were wonderfully good in spite of his profound sleep; "eh! eh! he makes his little confidential communication on paper, I see; now we will discover something positive."

His note written, Prosper folded it carefully into the smallest possible size, and after furtively glancing toward the detective, who remained motionless in his corner, threw it across the desk to little Cavaillon with this one word—"Gipsy!"

All this was so quickly and cleverly done that Fanferlot was confounded, and began to feel a little uneasy. "The devil take him!" said he to himself; "for a suffering innocent this young dandy has more pluck and nerve than many of my oldest customers. This, however, shows the result of education!"

Yes, innocent or guilty, Prosper must have been endowed with great self-control and power of dissimulation to affect this presence of mind at a time when his honor, his future happiness, all that he held dear in life, were at stake. And he was not more than thirty years old.

Either from natural deference, or from the hope of gaining some ray of light by a private conversation, the commissary determined to speak to the banker before acting decisively. "There is not a shadow of doubt," said he, as soon as they were alone; "this young man has robbed you. It would be a gross neglect of duty if I did not secure his person. The law will decide whether he shall be released or sent to prison."

This declaration seemed to distress the banker. He sank into a chair, and murmured: "Poor Prosper!" Seeing the astonished look of his listener, he added: "Until to-day, I have always had the most implicit faith in my cashier's honesty, and would have unhesitatingly confided my fortune to his keeping. Almost on my knees have I besought and implored him to confess that in a moment of desperation he had taken the money, promising him pardon and forgetfulness; but I could not move him. I loved him; and even now, in spite of the trouble and humiliation that he is heaping upon me, I can not bring myself to feel harshly toward him."

The commissary looked as if he did not understand. "What do you mean by humiliation?" he asked.

"What!" said M. Fauvel excitedly, "is not justice the same for all? Because I am the head of a bank, and he only a clerk, does it follow that my word is more to be relied upon than his? Why could I not have robbed myself? Such things have been done. They will ask me for facts; and I shall be compelled to expose the exact situation of my house, explain my affairs, disclose the secret and method of my operations."

"It is possible that you will be called upon for some explanation; but your well-known integrity——"

"Alas! He was honest too. His integrity has never been doubted. Who would have been suspected this morning if I had not been able to instantly produce a hundred thousand crowns? Who would be suspected if I could not prove that my assets exceed my liabilities by more than three millions?"

To a strictly honorable man, the thought, the possibility of suspicion tarnishing his fair name, is cruel suffering. The banker suffered, and the commissary of police saw it, and felt

for him. "Be calm, sir," said he; "before the end of a week, justice will have collected sufficient proof to establish the guilt of this unfortunate man, whom we may now recall."

Prosper entered with Fanferlot—whom they had much trouble to awaken—and with the most stolid indifference listened to the announcement of his arrest. In response he calmly said: "I swear that I am guiltless."

M. Fauvel, much more disturbed and excited than his cashier, made a last attempt. "It is not too late yet, poor boy," he said: "for heaven's sake reflect—"

Prosper did not appear to hear him. He drew from his pocket a small key, which he laid on the table, and said: "Here, sir, is the key of your safe. I hope for my sake that you will some day be convinced of my innocence; and I hope for your sake that the conviction will not come too late." Then as every one was silent, he resumed: "Before leaving I hand over to you the books, papers, and accounts necessary for my successor. I must at the same time inform you that, without speaking of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs, I leave a deficit in cash."

A deficit! This ominous word from the lips of the cashier fell like a bombshell upon the ears of Prosper's hearers. His declaration was interpreted in divers ways. "A deficit!" thought the commissary; "how, after this, can his guilt be doubted? Before stealing the whole contents of the safe, he has kept his hand in by occasional small thefts." "A deficit!" said the detective to himself, "now, no doubt, the very innocence of this poor wretch gives his conduct an appearance of great depravity; were he guilty, he would have replaced the first money by a portion of the second."

The grave importance of Prosper's statement was considerably lessened by the explanation he proceeded to make: "There is a deficit of three thousand five hundred francs on my cash account, which has been disposed of in the following manner: two thousand taken by myself in advance on my salary; fifteen hundred advanced to several of my fellow clerks. This is the last day of the month: to-morrow the salaries will be paid, consequently—"

The commissary interrupted him: "Were you authorized to draw money whenever you wished for yourself or the clerks?"

"No; but I knew that M. Fauvel would not have refused me permission to oblige my friends in the bank. What I did

is done everywhere; I have simply followed my predecessor's example." The banker made a sign of assent. "As regards that spent by myself," continued the cashier, "I had a sort of right to it, all of my savings being deposited in this bank; about fifteen thousand francs."

"That is true," said M. Fauvel, "M. Bertomy has at least that amount on deposit."

This last question settled, the commissary's errand was at an end, and his report might now be made. He announced his intention of leaving, and ordered the cashier to prepare to follow him.

Usually, the moment—when stern reality stares us in the face, when our individuality is lost, and we feel that we are being deprived of our liberty—is terrible. At the fatal command, "Follow me," which brings before our eyes the yawning prison gates, the most hardened sinner feels his courage fail, and abjectly begs for mercy. But Prosper lost none of that studied stoicism which the commissary of police secretly pronounced consummate impudence. Slowly, with as much careless ease as if going to lunch with a friend, he smoothed his hair, drew on his overcoat and gloves, and said politely: "I am ready, sir, to accompany you."

The commissary folded up his note-book, and bowing to M. Fauvel, said to Prosper: "Come with me!"

They left the room, and with a distressed face, and eyes filled with tears that he could not restrain, the banker stood watching their retreating forms.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed: "gladly would I give twice that sum to regain my old confidence in poor Prosper, and be able to keep him with me!"

The quick-eared Fanferlot overheard these words, and prompt to suspicion, and ever disposed to impute to others the deep astuteness peculiar to himself, was convinced they had been uttered for his benefit. He had remained behind the others, under pretext of looking for an imaginary umbrella, and, as he reluctantly departed, said he would call in again to see if it had been found.

It was Fanferlot's task to escort Prosper to prison; but, as they were about starting, he asked the commissary to leave him at liberty to pursue another course, a request which his superior granted. Fanferlot had resolved to obtain possession of Prosper's note, which he knew to be in Cavaillon's pocket

To obtain this written proof, which must be an important one, appeared the easiest thing in the world. He had simply to arrest Cavaillon, frighten him, demand the letter, and, if necessary, take it by force. But to what would this lead? To nothing but an incomplete and doubtful result.

Fanferlot was convinced that the note was intended, not for the young clerk, but for a third person. If exasperated, Cavaillon might refuse to divulge who this person was, who after all might not bear the name "Gipsy" pronounced by the cashier. And, even if he did answer his questions, would he not lie? After mature reflection, Fanferlot decided that it would be superfluous to ask for a secret when it could be surprised. To quietly follow Cavaillon, and keep close watch on him until he caught him in the very act of handing over the letter, was but play for the detective. This method of proceeding, moreover, was much more in keeping with the character of Fanferlot, who, being naturally soft and stealthy, deemed it due to his profession to avoid all disturbance or anything resembling violence.

Fanferlot's plan was settled when he reached the vestibule. He began talking with an office-boy, and, after a few apparently idle questions, discovered that Fauvel's bank had no outlet on the Rue de la Victoire, and that consequently all the clerks were obliged to pass in and out through the main entrance in the Rue de Provence. From this moment the task he had undertaken no longer presented a shadow of difficulty. He rapidly crossed the street, and took up his position under a gateway. His post of observation was admirably chosen; not only could he see every one who entered and came out of the bank, but he also commanded a view of all the windows, and by standing on tiptoe could look through the grating and see Cavaillon bending over his desk.

Fanferlot waited a long time, but did not get impatient, for he had often remained on watch entire days and nights at a time, with much less important objects in view than the present one. Besides, his mind was busily occupied in estimating the value of his discoveries, weighing his chances, and, like Perrette with her pot of milk, building the foundation of his fortune upon present success. Finally, about one o'clock, he saw Cavaillon rise from his desk, change his coat, and take down his hat. "Very good!" he exclaimed, "my man is coming out; I must keep my eyes open."

The next moment Cavaillon appeared at the door of the bank; but before stepping on the pavement he looked up and down the street in an undecided manner.

"Can he suspect anything?" thought Fanferlot.

No, the young clerk suspected nothing; only having a commission to execute, and fearing his absence would be observed, he was debating with himself which would be the shortest road for him to take. He soon decided, entered the Faubourg Montmartre, and walked up the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette so rapidly, utterly regardless of the grumbling passers-by whom he elbowed out of his way, that Fanferlot found it difficult to keep him in sight. Reaching the Rue Chaptal, Cavaillon suddenly stopped, and entered the house numbered 39. He had scarcely taken three steps in the narrow hall when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and turning abruptly found himself face to face with Fanferlot. He recognized him at once, and turning very pale he shrank back, and looked around for means of escape. But the detective, anticipating the attempt, barred the way. Cavaillon saw that he was fairly caught. "What do you want with me?" he asked in a voice tremulous with fright.

Fanferlot was distinguished among his colleagues for his exquisite suavity and unequaled urbanity. Even with his prisoners he was the perfection of courtesy, and never was known to handcuff a man without first apologizing for being compelled to do so. "You will be kind enough, my dear sir," he said, "to excuse the great liberty I take; but I really am under the necessity of asking you for a little information."

"Information! From me?"

"From you, my dear sir; from M. Eugene Cavaillon."

"But I do not know you."

"Oh, yes, you must remember seeing me this morning. It is only about a trifling matter, and you will overwhelm me with obligations if you will do me the honor to accept my arm, and step outside for a moment." What could Cavaillon do? He took Fanferlot's arm, and went out with him.

The Rue Chaptal is not one of those noisy thoroughfares where foot-passengers are in perpetual danger of being run over by numberless vehicles dashing to and fro; there are but two or three shops, and from the corner of the Rue Fontaine, occupied by an apothecary, to the entrance of the Rue Lennie, extends a high, gloomy wall, broken here and there by some small windows which light the carpenters' shops behind. It is

one of those streets where you can talk at your ease, without having to step from the sidewalk every moment. So Fanferlot and Cavaillon were in no danger of being disturbed by passers-by.

"What I wished to say, my dear sir," began the detective, "is that M. Prosper Bertomy threw you a note this morning."

Cavaillon vaguely foresaw that he was to be questioned about this note and instantly put himself on his guard. "You are mistaken," he said, blushing to his ears.

"Excuse me for presuming to contradict you, but I am quite certain of what I say."

"I assure you that Prosper never gave me anything."

"Pray, sir, do not persist in a denial; you will compel me to prove that four clerks saw him throw you a note written in pencil and closely folded."

Cavaillon saw the folly of further contradicting a man so well informed; so he changed his tactics, and said: "It is true Prosper gave me a note this morning; but as it was intended for me alone, after reading it, I tore it up, and threw the pieces in the fire."

This might be the truth. Fanferlot feared so; but how could he assure himself of the fact? He remembered that the most palpable tricks often succeed the best, and, trusting to his star, he said at hazard: "Permit me to observe that this statement is not correct; the note was entrusted to you to give to Gipsy."

A despairing gesture from Cavaillon apprised the detective that he was not mistaken; he breathed again. "I swear to you, sir—" began the young man.

"Do not swear," interrupted Fanferlot: "all the oaths in the world would be useless. You not only preserved the note, but you came to this house for the purpose of giving it to Gipsy, and it is in your pocket now."

"No, sir, no!"

Fanferlot paid no attention to this denial, but continued in his gentlest tone: "And I am sure you will be kind enough to give it to me; believe me, nothing but the most absolute necessity—"

"Never!" exclaimed Cavaillon; and, believing the moment favorable, he suddenly attempted to jerk his arm from under Fanferlot's and escape. But his efforts were vain; the detective's strength was equal to his suavity.

"Don't hurt yourself, young man," he said, "but take my advice, and quietly give up the letter."

"I have not got it."

"Very well; see, you reduce me to painful extremities. If you persist in being so obstinate, I shall call two policemen, who will take you by each arm, and escort you to the commissary of police; and, once there, I shall be under the painful necessity of searching your pockets, whether you will or not."

Cavaillon was devoted to Prosper, and willing to make any sacrifice in his behalf; but he clearly saw that it was worse than useless to struggle any longer, as he would have no time to destroy the note. To deliver it under force was no betrayal; but he cursed his powerlessness, and almost wept with rage. "I am in your power," he said, and then suddenly drew from his pocket-book the unlucky note, and gave it to the detective.

Fanferlot trembled with pleasure as he unfolded the paper; yet, faithful to his habits of fastidious politeness, before reading it, he bowed to Cavaillon and said: "You will permit me, will you not, sir?" Then he read as follows:

"Dear Nina—If you love me, follow my instructions instantly, without a moment's hesitation, without asking any questions. On the receipt of this note, take everything you have in the house, *absolutely everything*, and establish yourself in furnished rooms at the other end of Paris. Do not appear in public, but conceal yourself as much as possible. My life may depend on your obedience. I am accused of an outrageous robbery, and am about to be arrested. Take with you five hundred francs, which you will find in the secretary. Leave your address with Cavaillon, who will explain what I have not time to tell. Be hopeful, whatever happens. Good-by!

"Prosper."

Had Cavaillon been less bewildered, he would have seen blank disappointment depicted upon the detective's face after the perusal of the note. Fanferlot had cherished the hope that he was about to possess a very important document which would clearly prove the guilt or innocence of Prosper; whereas he had only seized a love-letter written by a man who was evidently more anxious about the welfare of the woman he loved than about his own. Vainly did he puzzle over the letter, hoping to discover some hidden meaning: twist the words as he would,

they proved nothing for or against the writer. The two words "absolutely everything" were underscored, it is true; but they could be interpreted in so many ways. The detective, however, determined not to drop the matter here. "This Madame Nina Gipsy is doubtless a friend of M. Prosper Bertomy?"

"She is his *particular* friend."

"Ah, I understand; and she lives here at No. 39?"

"You know it well enough, as you saw me go in there."

"I suspected it to be the house, but now tell me whether the apartments she occupies are rented in her name."

"No. Prosper rents them."

"Exactly; and on which floor, if you please?"

"On the first."

During this colloquy, Fanferlot had folded up the note, and slipped it into his pocket. "A thousand thanks," said he, "for the information; and, in return, I will relieve you of the trouble of executing your commission."

"Sir!"

"Yes; with your permission, I will myself take this note to Madame Nina Gipsy."

Cavaillon began to remonstrate, but Fanferlot cut him short by saying: "I will also venture to give you a piece of advice Return quietly to your business and have nothing more to do with this affair."

"But Prosper is a good friend of mine, and has saved me from ruin more than once."

"Only the more reason for your keeping quiet. You can not be of the slightest assistance to him, and I can tell you that you may be of great injury. As you are known to be his devoted friend, of course your absence at this time will be remarked upon. Any steps that you take in this matter will receive the worst interpretation."

"Prosper is innocent, I am sure."

Fanferlot was of the same opinion, but he had no idea of betraying his private thoughts; and yet for the success of his investigations it was necessary to impress the importance of prudence and discretion upon the young man. He would have told him to keep silent concerning what had passed between them, but he dared not.

"What you say may be true," he said. "I hope it is for the sake of M. Bertomy, and on your own account too; for, if he is guilty, you will certainly be very much annoyed, and perhaps

suspected of complicity, as you are well known to be intimate with him."

Cavaillon was overcome.

"Now, you had better take my advice, and return to the bank, and—good morning, sir."

The poor fellow obeyed. Slowly and with swelling heart he returned to the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. He asked himself how he could serve Prosper, warn Madame Gipsy, and above all, have his revenge upon this odious detective, who had just made him suffer such humiliation. He had no sooner turned the corner of the street than Fanferlot entered No. 39, mentioned the name of Prosper Bertomy to the concierge, went upstairs, and knocked at the first door he came to. It was opened by a youthful footman, dressed in the most fanciful livery.

"Is Madame Gipsy at home?" inquired Fanferlot.

The servant hesitated; seeing this, Fanferlot showed his note and said: "M. Prosper told me to hand this note to madame and wait for an answer."

"Walk in, and I will let madame know you are here."

The name of Prosper produced its effect. Fanferlot was ushered into a little room furnished in blue and gold silk damask. Heavy curtains darkened the windows, and hung in front of the doors. The floor was covered with a blue velvet-pile carpet.

"Our cashier was certainly well lodged," murmured the detective. But he had no time to pursue his inventory. One of the curtains was pushed aside, and Madame Nina Gipsy stood before him. She was quite young, small, and graceful, with a brown or rather gold-colored quadroon complexion, and the hands and feet of a child. Long curling silk lashes softened the piercing brilliancy of her large black eyes; her lips were full, and her teeth were very white. She had not yet made her toilet, but wore a velvet dressing-gown, which did not conceal the lace ruffles beneath. But she had already been under the hands of a hairdresser. Her hair was curled and frizzed high on her forehead, and confined by narrow bands of red velvet; her back hair was rolled in an immense coil, and held by a beautiful gold comb. She was ravishing. Her beauty was so startling that the dazzled detective was speechless with admiration.

"Well," he said to himself, as he remembered the noble,

severe beauty of Madeleine, whom he had seen a few hours previous, "our young gentleman certainly has good taste—very good taste—two perfect beauties!"

While he thus reflected, perfectly bewildered, and wondering how he could begin the conversation, Madame Gipsy eyed him with the most disdainful surprise: she was waiting for this shabby little man in a threadbare coat and greasy hat to explain his presence in her dainty drawing-room. She had many creditors, and was recalling them, and wondering which one had dared send this man to wipe his dusty boots on her velvet-pile carpets. After scrutinizing him from head to foot with undisguised contempt, she said haughtily: "What is it that you want?"

Any one but Fanferlot would have been offended at her insolent manner; but he only noticed it to gain some notion of the young woman's disposition. "She is bad-tempered," he thought, "and is uneducated."

While he was speculating upon her merits, Madame Nina impatiently stamped her little foot, and waited for an answer; finally she said: "Why don't you speak? What do you want here?"

"I am charged, my dear madame," he answered in his blandest tone, "by M. Bertomy to give you this note."

"From Prosper! You know him then?"

"I have that honor, madame; indeed, I may be so bold as to claim him as a friend."

"What, sir! *You* a friend of Prosper!" exclaimed Madame Gipsy in a scornful tone, as if her pride were wounded.

Fanferlot did not condescend to notice this offensive exclamation. He was ambitious, and contempt failed to irritate him. "I said a friend of his, madame, and there are few people who would have the courage to claim friendship for him now."

Madame Gipsy was struck by the words and manner of Fanferlot. "I never could guess riddles," she said tartly; "will you be kind enough to explain what you mean?"

The detective slowly drew Prosper's note from his pocket, and, with a bow, presented it to Madame Gipsy. "Read, madame," he said.

She certainly anticipated no misfortune; although her sight was excellent, she stopped to fasten a tiny gold eyeglass on her nose, then carelessly opened the note. At a glance she read its contents. She turned very pale, then very red; she trembled

as if with a nervous chill; her limbs seemed to give way, and she tottered so that Fanferlot, thinking she was about to fall, extended his arms to catch her.

Useless precaution! Madame Gipsy was one of those women whose inert listlessness conceals indomitable energy; fragile-looking creatures whose powers of endurance and resistance are unlimited; cat-like in their soft grace and delicacy, especially cat-like in their nerves and muscles of steel. The dizziness caused by the shock she had received quickly passed off. She tottered, but did not fall, and stood up looking stronger than ever; seizing the wrist of the detective, she held it as if her delicate little hands were a vise, and cried out: "Explain yourself! what does all this mean? Do you know anything about the contents of this note?"

Although Fanferlot showed plenty of courage in daily contending with the most dangerous rascals, he was almost terrified by the action of Madame Gipsy. "Alas!" was all he murmured.

"Prosper is to be arrested, accused of being a thief?"

"Yes, madame, he is accused of taking three hundred and fifty thousand francs from the bank safe."

"It is false, infamous, absurd!" she cried. She had dropped Fanferlot's hand; and her fury, like that of a spoiled child, found vent in violent actions. She tore her web-like handkerchief, and the magnificent lace on her gown, to shreds. "Prosper steal!" she cried; "what a stupid idea! Why should he steal? Is he not rich?"

"M. Bertomy is not rich, madame; he has nothing but his salary."

This answer seemed to confound Madame Gipsy. "But," she insisted, "I have always seen him with plenty of money; not rich—then—" She dared not finish; but her eye met Fanferlot's, and they understood each other.

Madame Nina's look meant: "He committed this robbery in order to gratify my extravagant whims." Fanferlot's glance signified: "Very likely, madame."

A few moments' reflection restored Nina's original assurance. Doubt fled after hovering for an instant over her agitated mind. "No!" she cried. "I regret to say that Prosper would never have stolen a single sou for me. One can understand a man robbing a bank to obtain the means of bestowing pleasure and luxury upon the woman he loves; but Prosper does not love me; he never has loved me."

"Oh, my dear lady!" protested the gallant and insinuating Fanferlot, "you surely can not mean what you say."

Her beautiful eyes filled with tears as she sadly shook her head and replied: "I mean exactly what I say. It is only too true. He is ready to gratify my every wish, you may say; what does that prove? Nothing. I am too well convinced that he does not love me. I know what love is. Once I was beloved by an affectionate, true-hearted man; and my own sufferings of the last year make me know how miserable I must have made him by my cold return. Alas! we must suffer ourselves before we can feel for others. No, I am nothing to Prosper; he would not care if—"

"But then, madame, why—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Nina, "why? You will be very wise if you can answer me. For a year have I vainly sought an answer to this question, so sad to me. I, a woman, can not answer it; and I defy you to do so. You can not discover the thoughts of a man who is so thoroughly master of himself that he never permits a single idea that is passing through his mind to be detected upon his countenance. I have watched him as only a woman can watch the man upon whom her fate depends, but it has always been in vain. He is kind and indulgent; but he does not betray himself, never will commit himself. Ignorant people call him weak, yielding: I tell you that fair-haired man is a rod of iron painted like a reed!"

Carried away by the violence of her feelings, Madame Nina betrayed her inmost thoughts. She was without distrust, never suspecting that the stranger listening to her was other than a friend of Prosper. As for Fanferlot, he congratulated himself upon his success. No one but a woman could have drawn him so excellent a portrait; in a moment of excitement she had given him the most valuable information; he now knew the nature of the man with whom he had to deal, which, in an investigation like that he was pursuing, is the principal point. "You know that M. Bertomy gambles," he ventured to say, "and gambling is apt to lead a man—"

Madame Gipsy shrugged her shoulders, and interrupted him. "Yes, he plays," she said, "but he is not a gambler. I have seen him lose and gain large sums without betraying the slightest agitation. He plays as he drinks, as he sups, as he dissipates—without passion, without enthusiasm, without pleasure. Sometimes he frightens me; he seems to drag about a body with-

out a soul. Ah, I am not happy! Never have I been able to overcome his indifference, an indifference so great, so reckless, that I often think it must be despair; nothing will convince me that he has not some terrible secret, some great misfortune weighing upon his mind, and making life a burden."

"Then he has never spoken to you of his past?"

"Why should he tell me? Did you not hear me? I tell you he does not love me!"

Madame Nina was overcome by thoughts of the past, and tears silently coursed down her cheeks. But her despair was only momentary. She started up, and, her eyes sparkling with generous resolution, she exclaimed: "But I love him, and I will save him! I will see his chief, the miserable wretch who dares to accuse him. I will haunt the judges, and I will prove that he is innocent. Come, sir, let us start, and I promise you that before sunset he shall be free, or I shall be in prison with him."

Madame Gipsy's project was certainly laudable, and prompted by the noblest sentiments; but unfortunately it was impracticable. Moreover, it would be going counter to the plans of the detective. Although he had resolved to reserve to himself all the difficulties as well as the benefits of this inquiry, Fanferlot saw clearly that he could not conceal the existence of Madame Nina from the investigating magistrate. She would necessarily be brought into the case, and be sought after. But he did not wish her to take any steps of her own accord. He proposed to let her appear when and how he judged proper, so that he might gain for himself the merit of having discovered her.

Fanferlot's first step was to try to calm the young woman's excitement. He thought it easy to prove to her that the slightest interference in favor of Prosper would be a piece of folly. "What will you gain by acting thus, my dear madame?" he asked. "Nothing. I can assure you that you have not the least chance of success. Remember that you will seriously compromise yourself. Who knows if you will not be suspected as M. Bertomy's accomplice?"

But this alarming perspective, which had frightened Cavaillon into foolishly giving up a letter which he might so easily have retained, only stimulated Gipsy's enthusiasm. Man calculates, while woman follows the inspirations of her heart. Our most devoted friend, if a man, hesitates and draws back; if a woman,

rushes undauntedly forward, regardless of the danger. "What matters the risk?" she exclaimed. "I don't believe any danger exists; but, if it does, so much the better: it will be all the more to my credit. I am sure Prosper is innocent; but, if he should be guilty, I wish to share the punishment which awaits him."

Madame Gipsy's persistence was becoming alarming. She astily drew around her a cashmere shawl, put on her bonnet, and, although still wearing her dressing-gown and slippers, declared that she was ready to walk from one end of Paris to the other, in search of this or the other magistrate.

"Come, sir," she said, with feverish impatience. "Are you not coming with me?"

Fanferlot was perplexed. Happily he had always several strings to his bow. Personal considerations having no hold upon this impulsive nature, he resolved to appeal to her interest in Prosper.

"I am at your command, my dear lady," he said; "let us go if you desire it; only permit me, while there is yet time, to say that we are very probably about to do great injury to M. Bertomy."

"In what way, if you please?"

"Because we are taking a step that he expressly forbade in his letter; we are surprising him—giving him no warning."

Nina scornfully tossed her head, and replied: "There are some people who must be saved without warning, and against their will. I know Prosper; he is just the man to let himself be murdered without a struggle, without speaking a word—to give himself up through sheer recklessness and despair."

"Excuse me, madame," interrupted the detective; "M. Bertomy has by no means the appearance of a man who has abandoned himself to despair. On the contrary, I think he has already prepared his plan of defense. By showing yourself, when he advises you to remain in concealment, you will very likely render his most careful precautions useless."

Madame Gipsy was silently weighing the value of Fanferlot's objections. Finally she said: "I can not remain here inactive without attempting to contribute in some way to his safety. Can you not understand that this floor burns my feet?"

Evidently, if she was not absolutely convinced, her resolution was shaken. Fanferlot saw that he was gaining ground, and this certainty, putting him more at east, gave weight to his

persuasive eloquence. "You have it in your power, madame," he said, "to render a great service to the man you love."

"In what way, sir? tell me in what way."

"Obey him, my child," said Fanferlot in a paternal tone.

Madame Gipsy evidently expected very different advice. "Obey," she murmured, "obey!"

"It is your duty," said Fanferlot with grave dignity; "it is your sacred duty."

She still hesitated; and he took from the table Prosper's note, which she had laid there, and continued: "What! M. Bertomy at the most trying moment, when he is about to be arrested, stops to point out your line of conduct; and you would render vain this wise precaution! What does he say to you? Let us read over this note, which is like the testament of his liberty. He says, 'If you love me, I entreat you, obey.' And you hesitate to obey. Then you do not love him. Can you not understand, unhappy child, that M. Bertomy has his reasons, terrible, imperious reasons, for your remaining in obscurity for the present?"

Fanferlot understood these reasons the moment he put his foot in the sumptuous apartment of the Rue Chaptal; and, if he did not expose them now, it was because he kept them as a good general keeps his reserve, for the purpose of deciding the victory. Madame Gipsy was intelligent enough to divine these reasons.

"Reasons for my hiding!" thought she. "Prosper wishes, then, to keep every one in ignorance of our intimacy."

She remained thoughtful for a moment; then a ray of light seemed to cross her mind, and she exclaimed: "Oh, I understand now! Fool that I was for not seeing it before! My presence here, where I have been for a year, would be an overwhelming charge against him. An inventory of my possessions would be taken—of my dresses, my laces, my jewels—and my luxury would be brought against him as a crime. He would be asked where he obtained the money requisite to lavish all these elegancies on me."

The detective bowed, and said: "That is perfectly true, madame."

"Then I must fly at once! Who knows that the police are not already warned, and may appear at any moment?"

"Oh," said Fanferlot with easy assurance, "you have plenty of time; the police are not so very prompt."

"No matter!"

And, leaving the detective alone in the parlor, Madame Nina hastily ran into her bedroom, and calling her maid, her cook, and her little footman, ordered them to empty her drawers and wardrobe of their contents, and assisted them to stuff her best clothing and jewels into her trunks. Suddenly she rushed back to Fanferlot, and said: "Everything will be ready for me to start in a few minutes; but where am I to go?"

"Did not M. Bertomy say, my dear lady, to the other end of Paris? To a hotel, or furnished apartments."

"But I don't know where to find any."

Fanferlot seemed to be reflecting; but he had great difficulty in concealing his delight at a sudden idea that flashed upon him; his little black eyes fairly danced with joy. "I know a hotel," he said at last, "but it might not suit you. It is not elegantly furnished like this apartment."

"Should I be comfortable there?"

"Upon my recommendation you would be treated like a queen, and, above all, you would be kept concealed."

"Where is it?"

"On the other side of the river, on the Quai Saint Michel. It is called the Grand Archangel, and is kept by Madame Alexandre."

Madame Nina was never long making up her mind. "Here are pen and paper," said she, "write your recommendation."

Fanferlot rapidly wrote, and handed her the letter, saying: "With these three lines, madame, you can make Madame Alexandre do anything you wish."

"Very good. Now, how am I to let Cavaillon know my address? It was he who should have brought me Prosper's letter."

"He was unable to come, madame," interrupted the detective; "but I will give him your address."

Madame Gipsy was about to send for a carriage, but Fanferlot said he was in a hurry and would procure her one. He seemed to be in luck that day; for a cab was passing the door, and he hailed it. "Wait here," he said to the driver, after telling him that he was a detective, "for a little brunette who is coming down with some trunks. If she tells you to drive her to the Quai Saint Michel, crack your whip; if she gives you any other address, get down from your box and arrange your harness. I will keep in sight."

He stepped across the street, and stood in the door of a wine-shop. He had not long to wait. In a few minutes the loud cracking of a whip apprised him that Madame Nina had started for the Hotel of the Grand Archangel. "Aha!" said he gaily, "I hold *her* at any rate."

IV

AT the same hour that Madame Nina Gipsy was seeking refuge at the Grand Archangel, so highly recommended by Fanferlot, Prosper Bertomy was being consigned to the depot of the Prefecture of Police. From the moment he had resumed his habitual composure, he never once faltered. Vainly did the people around him watch for a suspicious expression, or any sign of his giving way under the embarrassment of his situation. His face was stolid as marble, and one would have supposed him insensible to the horrors of his condition had not his heavy breathing, and the beads of perspiration standing on his brow, betrayed the intense agony he was suffering.

At the police station, where Prosper had to wait for two hours while the commissary went to receive orders from higher authorities, he entered into conversation with the two police agents who had charge of him. At twelve o'clock he said he was hungry, and sent to a restaurant near by for his lunch, which he ate with a good appetite, and also drank nearly a bottle of wine. While he was thus occupied, several clerks from the Prefecture, who have to transact business daily with the commissaries of police, eyed him curiously. They all formed the same opinion, and admiringly said to each other: "Well, he is certainly made of strong stuff, that fellow!" And again: "The young gentleman doesn't seem to care much. He has evidently something in reserve."

When he was told that a cab was waiting for him at the door, he at once rose; but, before going out, requested permission to light a cigar, which was granted him. A flower-girl stood just by the door, and he stopped and bought a bunch of

violets of her. The girl, seeing that he was arrested, said, by way of thanks: "Good luck to you, my poor gentleman!"

Prosper appeared touched by this mark of interest, and replied: "Thanks, my good girl, but 'tis a long time since luck has been in my way."

It was magnificent weather, a bright spring morning. As the cab went along the Rue Montmartre, Prosper kept his head out of the window, smilingly complaining at the same time at being imprisoned on such a lovely day, when everything outside was so sunny and pleasant. "It is singular," he said, "I never felt so great a desire to take a walk."

One of the police agents, a large, jovial, red-faced man, received this remark with a hearty burst of laughter, and said: "I understand."

While Prosper was going through the formalities of the commitment, he replied with haughty brevity to the indispensable questions that were put to him. But after, being ordered to empty his pockets on the table, they began to search him, his eyes flashed with indignation, and a single tear coursed down his flushed cheek. In an instant he had recovered his stony calmness, and stood up motionless, with his arms raised in the air, so that the rough creatures about him could more conveniently ransack him from head to foot, to assure themselves that he had no suspicious object concealed under his clothes.

The search would have, perhaps, been carried to the most ignominious lengths but for the intervention of a middle-aged man of rather distinguished appearance, who wore a white cravat and gold spectacles, and was sitting at his ease by the fire. He started with surprise, and seemed much agitated, when he saw Prosper brought in by the officers; he stepped forward, as if about to speak to him, then suddenly changed his mind, and sat down again.

In spite of his own troubles, Prosper could not help perceiving that this man kept his eyes fixed upon him. Did he know him? Vainly did he try to recollect having met him before. This individual, treated with all the deference due to a chief, was no less a personage than M. Lecoq, a celebrated member of the detective police. When the men who were searching Prosper were about to take off his boots, under the idea that a knife might be concealed in them, M. Lecoq waved them aside with an air of authority, and said: "You have done enough."

He was obeyed. All the formalities being ended, the unfortunate cashier was taken to a narrow cell; the heavily barred door was swung to and locked upon him; he breathed freely; at last he was alone. Yes, he believed himself to be alone. He was ignorant that a prison is made of glass, that the prisoner is like a miserable insect under the microscope of an entomologist.

He knew not that the walls have listening ears and watchful eyes. He felt so certain of being alone that he at once gave vent to his suppressed feelings, and, dropping his mask of impassibility, burst into a flood of tears. His long-restrained anger now flashed out like a smoldering fire. In a paroxysm of rage he uttered imprecations and curses. He dashed himself against the prison walls like a wild beast in a cage.

Prosper Bertomy was not the man he appeared to be. This haughty, correct gentleman had ardent passions and a fiery temperament. One day, when he was about twenty-four years of age, he had become suddenly fired by ambition. While all of his desires were repressed—imprisoned in his low estate, like an athlete in a strait-waistcoat—seeing around him all those rich people with whom money served the purpose of the wand in the fairy tale, he envied them their lot.

He studied the beginnings of these financial princes, and found that at the starting-point they possessed far less than himself. How, then, had they succeeded? By the force of energy, industry, and assurance. He determined to imitate and excel them.

From that day, with a force of will much less rare than we think, he imposed silence upon his instincts. He reformed not his character, but the outside of his character; and his efforts were not without success. Those who knew him had faith in his character; and his capabilities and ambition inspired the prophecy that he would be successful in attaining eminence and wealth.

And the end of all was this—to be imprisoned for robbery; that is, ruined!

For he did not attempt to deceive himself. He knew that, guilty or innocent, a man once suspected is as ineffaceably branded as the shoulder of a galley-slave. Therefore, what was the use of struggling? What benefit was a triumph which could not wash out the stain?

When the prison attendant brought him his supper, he found him lying on his mattress, with his face buried in the pillow, weeping bitterly. Ah, he was not hungry now! Now that he was alone, he was fed upon his own bitter thoughts. He sank from a state of frenzy into one of stupefying despair, and vainly did he endeavor to clear his confused mind, and account for the dark cloud gathering about him; no loophole for escape could he discover.

The night was long and terrible, and for the first time he had nothing to count the hours by, as they slowly dragged on, but the measured tread of the patrol who came to relieve the sentinels. He was now thoroughly wretched.

At dawn he dropped into a sleep, a heavy, oppressive sleep, which was more wearisome than refreshing; from which he was startled by the rough voice of the jailer.

"Come, sir!" said he, "it is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper jumped up at once, and, without stopping to set right his disordered toilet, said: "I am ready, lead the way."

The jailer remarked as they walked along: "You are very fortunate in having your case brought before a very worthy man." He was right.

Endowed with remarkable penetration, firm, unbiased, equally free from false pity and excessive severity, M. Patrigent possessed in an eminent degree all the qualities necessary for the delicate and arduous office of investigating magistrate. Perhaps he was wanting in the feverish activity which is sometimes necessary for coming to a quick and just decision; but he possessed unwearying patience, which nothing could discourage. He would cheerfully devote years to the examination of a case; he was even now engaged in an affair of Belgian bank-notes, of which he did not collect all the threads, and solve the mystery, until after four years' investigation. Thus it was always to him that they brought the endless proceedings, the half-finished inquiries, and the incomplete processes.

This was the man before whom Prosper was being conducted, and he was certainly taken by a difficult road. He was escorted along a corridor, through a room full of police agents, down a narrow flight of steps, across a kind of vault, and then up a steep staircase which seemed to have no end. Finally he reached a long, narrow gallery, on which opened numerous doors, bearing different numbers. The custodian of the unhappy cashier

stopped before one of these doors, and said: "Here we are, and here your fate will be decided."

At this remark, uttered in a tone of deep commiseration, Prosper could not refrain from shuddering. It was only too true, that on the other side of the door was a man who would interrogate him, and according to his answers would either release him from custody or commit him for trial. Summoning all his courage, he turned the door-knob, and was about to enter when the jailer stopped him. "Don't be in such haste," he said; "you must sit down here and wait till your turn comes; then you will be called." The wretched man obeyed, and his keeper took a seat beside him.

Nothing is more doleful and terrible than having to wait in this gloomy gallery of the investigating magistrates. Occupying the entire length of the wall is a wooden bench blackened by constant use. This bench has for the last ten years been daily occupied by the murderers, thieves, and suspicious characters of the department of the Seine. Sooner or later, as filth rushes to a sewer, does crime reach this dreadful gallery with one door opening on the galleys, the other on the scaffold. This place was bitterly though vulgarly denominated by a certain magistrate as the great public wash-house of all the foul linen in Paris.

When Prosper reached the gallery it was full of people. The bench was almost entirely occupied. Close beside him, so as to touch his shoulder, sat a man with a sinister countenance, dressed in rags.

Before each door, giving access to the offices of the investigating magistrates, stood groups of witnesses conversing in an undertone. Gendarmes were constantly arriving and departing with prisoners. Sometimes, above the noise of their heavy tramping along the flagstones, a woman's stifled sob might be heard, when, looking around, you would see some poor mother or wife with her face buried in her handkerchief, weeping bitterly. At short intervals a door would open and shut, when an officer would call out a name or number.

The stifling atmosphere, and the sight of so much misery, made Prosper feel ill and faint; he felt as if another five minutes' stay among these wretched creatures would make him deathly sick, when a little old man dressed in black, wearing a steel chain, the insignia of his office, cried out: "Prosper Bertomy!"

The unhappy man rose, and, without knowing how, found himself in the room of the investigating magistrate. For a moment he was blinded. He had come out of a dark passage; and the room in which he now found himself had a window directly opposite the door, so that a flood of light streamed suddenly upon him. This room, like all the others in the gallery, was of very ordinary appearance, and small and dingy. The wall was covered with a cheap dark paper, and on the floor was a hideous brown carpet, very much worn. Opposite the door was a large writing-table strewn with bundles of papers, furnishing the antecedents of those persons who were subjected to examinations, and behind was seated the magistrate, immediately facing those who entered, so that his countenance remained in the shade, while that of the prisoner or witness whom he questioned was in a glare of light.

Before a little table, on the right, sat a clerk, the indispensable auxiliary of the magistrate, engaged in writing.

But Prosper observed none of these details: his whole attention was concentrated upon the arbiter of his fate, and as he closely examined his face he was convinced that the jailer was right in styling him an honorable man. M. Patrigent's homely face, with its irregular outline and short red whiskers, lit up by a pair of bright, intelligent eyes, and a kindly expression, was calculated to impress one favorably at first sight. "Take a chair," he said to Prosper.

This little attention was gratefully welcomed by the prisoner, for he had expected to be treated with harsh contempt. He looked upon it as a good sign, and his mind felt a slight relief. M. Patrigent turned toward the clerk, and said: "We will begin now, Sigault; pay attention."

Looking at Prosper, he then asked him his name.

"Auguste Prosper Bertomy," replied the cashier.

"How old are you?"

"I shall be thirty on the fifth of next May."

"What is your profession?"

"I am—that is, I was—chief cashier in M. Andre Fauvel's bank."

The magistrate stopped to consult a little memorandum book lying on his desk. Prosper, who followed closely his every movement, began to be hopeful, saying to himself that never would a man seemingly so unprejudiced be cruel enough to send him to prison again. After finding what he looked for, M.

Patrigent resumed the examination. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"At No. 39, Rue Chaptal, for the last four years. Before that time I lived at No. 7, Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Where were you born?"

"At Beaucaire, in the department of Le Gard."

"Are your parents living?"

"My mother died two years ago; my father is still living."

"Does he reside in Paris?"

"No, sir; he lives at Beaucaire with my sister, who married one of the engineers of the Southern Canal." It was in broken accents that Prosper answered these last questions. Though there are moments in the life of a man when home memories encourage and console him, there are also moments when he would be thankful to be without a single tie, when he bitterly regrets that he is not alone in the world.

M. Patrigent observed the prisoner's emotion when he spoke of his parents. "What is your father's calling?" he continued.

"He was formerly a superintendent of roads and bridges; then he was employed on the Southern Canal like my brother-in-law; now he has retired on a pension."

There was a moment's silence. The magistrate had turned his chair round, so that, although his head was apparently averted, he had a good view of the workings of Prosper's countenance. "Well," he said abruptly, "you are accused of having robbed M. Fauvel of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

During the last twenty-four hours the wretched young man had had time to familiarize himself with the terrible idea of this accusation; and yet, uttered as it was now in this formal, brief tone, it seemed to strike him with a horror which rendered him incapable of opening his lips. "What have you to answer?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"That I am innocent, sir; I swear that I am innocent!"

"I hope you are," said M. Patrigent, "and you may count upon me to assist you, to the extent of my ability, in proving your innocence. You must have some facts to allege in your defense, some proofs you can furnish me with."

"Ah, sir, what can I say when I am myself unable to understand this dreadful business? I can only refer you to my past life."

The magistrate interrupted him: "Let us be specific; the robbery was committed under circumstances that prevent suspicion

from falling upon any one but M. Fauvel and yourself. Do you suspect any one else?"

"No, sir."

"You declare yourself to be innocent, therefore the guilty party must be M. Fauvel." Prosper remained silent. "Have you," persisted the magistrate, "any cause for believing that M. Fauvel robbed himself?" The prisoner preserved a rigid silence.

"I see," said the magistrate, "that you need time for reflection. Listen to the reading of your examination, and after signing it you will return to prison."

The unhappy man was overcome. The last ray of hope was gone. He heard nothing of what Sigault read, and he signed the paper without looking at it. He tottered as he left the magistrate's room, so that the agent who had him in charge was forced to support him. "I fear your case looks bad," said the man, "but don't be disheartened; keep up your courage."

Courage! Prosper had not a spark of it when he returned to his cell; but his heart was filled with anger and resentment. He had determined that he would defend himself before the magistrate, that he would prove his innocence; and he had not had time to do so. He reproached himself bitterly for having trusted to the magistrate's benevolent face. "What a farce," he angrily exclaimed, "to call that an examination!"

It was not really an examination that Prosper had been subjected to, but a mere formality. In summoning him, M. Patrigent obeyed Article 93 of the Criminal Code, which says, "Every suspected person under arrest must be examined within twenty-four hours." But it is not in twenty-four hours, especially in a case like this, with no evidence or material proof, that a magistrate can collect the materials for an examination. To triumph over the obstinate defense of a prisoner who shuts himself up in absolute denial as though in a fortress, valid proofs are needed. These weapons M. Patrigent was busily preparing.

If Prosper had remained a little longer in the gallery, he would have seen the same official who had called him come from the magistrate's room, and cry out, No. 3. The witness who was awaiting his turn, and answered the call for No. 3, was M. Fauvel.

The banker was no longer the same man. Yesterday he was kind and affable in his manner; now, as he entered the magis-

trate's room, he seemed irritated against his cashier. Reflection, which usually brings calmness and a desire to pardon, had in his case led to anger and a thirst for vengeance. The inevitable questions which commence every examination had scarcely been addressed to him before his impetuous temper gained the mastery, and he burst forth in invectives against Prosper.

M. Patrigent was obliged to impose silence upon the banker, reminding him of what was due to himself, no matter what wrongs he had suffered at the hands of his clerk. Although he had very slightly examined Prosper, the magistrate was now scrupulously attentive and particular in having every question answered. Prosper's examination had been a mere formality, the verifying of a positive fact. M. Patrigent now occupied himself in ferreting out all the attendant circumstances and the most trifling particulars, in order to group them together, and arrive at a just conclusion.

"Let us proceed with regularity," said the magistrate to M. Fauvel, "and pray confine yourself to answering my questions. Did you ever suspect your cashier of being dishonest?"

"Certainly not. Yet there were reasons which should have made me hesitate to trust him."

"What reasons?"

"M. Bertomy gambled. I have known of his spending whole nights at the card-table, and losing large sums of money. He was intimate with an unprincipled set. Once he was mixed up with one of my customers, M. de Clameran, in a scandalous gambling affair at the house of some disreputable woman, and which ended in an investigation at the police court."

For some minutes the banker continued to revile Prosper. "You must confess, sir," interrupted the magistrate, "that you were very imprudent, if not culpable, to have entrusted the contents of your safe to such a man."

"Ah, sir, Prosper was not always thus. Until the past year he was a perfect model for men of his age. He frequented my house as one of my family; he spent all of his evenings with us, and was the bosom friend of my eldest son Lucien. One day he suddenly left us, and never came to the house again. Yet I had every reason to believe him to be attached to my niece Madeleine."

M. Patrigent had an odd way of contracting his brows when he thought he had discovered some new proof. He now did

this, and said: "Might not this admiration for the young lady have been the cause of M. Bertomy's estrangement?"

"How so?" asked the banker with surprise. "I was willing to bestow Madeleine's hand upon him, and, to be frank, was astonished that he did not ask for her in marriage. My niece would be a good match for any man, and he should have considered himself fortunate in obtaining her. She is very handsome, and her dowry will be half a million."

"Then you can discover no motive for your cashier's conduct?"

"It is impossible for me to account for it. I have, however, always supposed that Prosper was led astray by a young man whom he met at my house about that time, M. Raoul de Lagors."

"Ah! and who is this young man?"

"A relative of my wife's; a very attractive, intelligent young man, somewhat wild, but rich enough to pay for his follies."

The magistrate wrote the name Lagors at the bottom of an already long list of his memoranda. "Now," he said, "let us come to the point. You are sure that the theft was not committed by any one of your household?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"You always kept your key?"

"I generally carried it about on my person; and whenever I left it at home, I placed it in the drawer of the secretary in my bedroom."

"Where was it on the evening of the robbery?"

"In my secretary."

"But then—"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," said M. Fauvel, "and permit me to tell you that, to a safe like mine, the key is of no importance. To open it, one must know the word upon which the five movable buttons turn. With the word one can even open it without the key; but without the word—"

"And you never told this word to any one?"

"To no one, sir, and sometimes I should have been puzzled to know myself with what word the safe had been closed. Prosper would change it when he chose, and then inform me of the change, but I often forgot it."

"Had you forgotten it on the day of the theft?"

"No; the word had been changed the day before; and its peculiarity struck me."

"What was it?"

"Gipsy—g-i-p-s-y," said the banker, spelling the name.

M. Patrigent wrote down this name. "One more question, sir," said he, "were you at home the evening before the robbery?"

"No; I dined and spent the evening with a friend; when I returned home, about one o'clock, my wife had retired, and I went to bed immediately."

"And you were not aware of the amount of money in the safe?"

"Absolutely. In conformity with my positive orders, I could only suppose that a small sum had been left there overnight; I stated this fact to the commissary in M. Bertomy's presence, and he acknowledged it to be the case."

"It is perfectly correct, sir: the commissary's report proves it." M. Patrigent was for a time silent. To him everything depended upon this one fact, that the banker was unaware of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs being in the safe, and Prosper had disobeyed orders by placing them there overnight; hence the conclusion was very easily drawn.

Seeing that his examination was over, the banker thought he would relieve his mind of what was weighing upon it. "I believe myself above suspicion, sir," he began, "and yet I can never rest easy until Bertomy's guilt has been clearly proved. Calumny prefers attacking a successful man, and I may be calumniated: three hundred and fifty thousand francs is a fortune capable of tempting even a rich man. I should be obliged if you would have the condition of my affairs strictly examined. This examination will prove that I could have had no interest in robbing my own safe. The prosperous condition—"

"That is sufficient, sir."

M. Patrigent was already well informed of the high standing of the banker, and knew almost as much of his affairs as M. Fauvel himself. He asked him to sign his testimony, and then escorted him to the door of his office, a rare favor on his part.

When M. Fauvel had left the room, Sigault indulged in a remark. "This seems to be a very cloudy case," he said; "if the cashier is shrewd and firm, it will be difficult to convict him."

"Perhaps it will," said the magistrate; "but let us hear what the other witnesses have to say."

The person who answered to the call for No. 4 was Lucien,

M. Fauvel's eldest son. He was a tall, handsome young man of twenty-two. To the magistrate's questions he replied that he was very fond of Prosper, was once very intimate with him, and had always regarded him as a strictly honorable man, incapable of doing anything unbecoming a gentleman. He declared that he could not imagine what fatal circumstances could have induced Prosper to commit the theft. He knew that he played cards, but not to the extent that was reported. He had never known him to indulge in expenses beyond his means. In regard to his cousin Madeleine, he replied: "I always thought that Prosper was in love with Madeleine, and, until yesterday, I was certain he would marry her, knowing that my father would not oppose their union. I have always attributed the discontinuance of Prosper's visits to a quarrel with my cousin, but supposed they would ultimately become reconciled."

This information threw more light upon Prosper's past life than that furnished by M. Fauvel, but did not apparently disclose any evidence which could be used in the present state of affairs. Lucien signed his deposition, and withdrew.

Cavaillon's turn for examination came next. The poor fellow was in a pitiable state of mind when he appeared before the magistrate. Having confided to a friend his adventure with the detective, as a great secret, and being jeered at for his cowardice in giving up the note, he felt great remorse, and passed the night in reproaching himself for having ruined Prosper. He endeavored to repair, as well as he could, what he called his treason. He did not exactly accuse M. Fauvel, but he courageously declared that he was the cashier's friend, and that he was as certain of his innocence as he was of his own. Unfortunately, besides having no proofs to strengthen his assertions, the latter were deprived of most of their value by his violent professions of friendship for the accused.

After Cavaillon, six or eight clerks of Fauvel's bank successively defiled in the magistrate's room; but their depositions were nearly all insignificant. One of them, however, stated a fact which the magistrate carefully noted. He said he knew that Prosper had speculated on the Bourse through the medium of M. Raoul de Lagors, and had gained immense sums. Five o'clock struck before the list of witnesses summoned for the day was exhausted. But M. Patrigent's task was not yet finished. He rang for his attendant, who instantly appeared, when he said to him: "Go at once and bring Fanferlot."

It was some time before the detective answered the summons. Having met a colleague in the gallery, he thought it his duty to treat him; and the official had to fetch him from the wine-shop at the corner.

"How is it that you keep people waiting?" said the magistrate, when the detective entered bowing and scraping. Fanferlot bowed more profoundly still. Despite his smiling face, he was very uneasy. To unravel the Bertomy case alone, it was requisite to play a double game that might be discovered at any moment. In serving at the same time the cause of justice and his own ambition, he ran great risks, the least of which was the losing of his place.

"I have had a great deal to do," he said, to excuse himself, "and have not wasted any time." And he began to give a detailed account of his movements. He was embarrassed, for he spoke with all sorts of restrictions, picking out what was to be said, and avoiding what was to be left unsaid. Thus he gave the history of Cavaillon's letter, which he handed to the magistrate; but he did not breathe a word of Madeleine. On the other hand, he furnished minute biographical details of Prosper and Madame Gipsy, which he had collected from various quarters during the day.

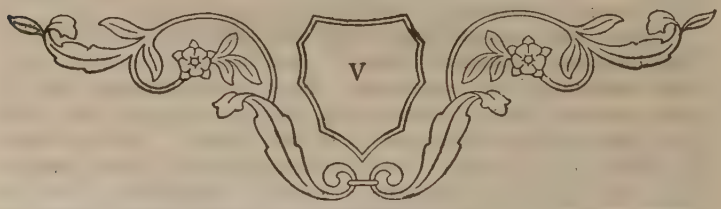
As the detective progressed, M. Patrigent's conviction was strengthened. "This young man is evidently guilty," he murmured. Fanferlot did not reply; his opinion was different, but he was delighted that the magistrate was on the wrong track, thinking that his own glorification would thereby be the greater when he discovered the real culprit. True, this grand discovery was as far off as it had ever been.

After hearing all he had to say, the magistrate dismissed Fanferlot, telling him to return the next day. "Above all," he said, as Fanferlot left the room, "do not lose sight of the woman Gipsy; she must know where the money is, and can put us on the right scent."

Fanferlot smiled cunningly. "You may rest easy about that, sir," replied he; "the lady is in good hands."

Left to himself, although the evening was far advanced, M. Patrigent continued to busy himself with the case, and to arrange for the rest of the depositions being taken. The affair had obtained complete possession of his mind; it was, at the same time, puzzling and attractive. It seemed to be surrounded by a cloud of mystery, which he determined to penetrate and dispel.

The next morning he was in his room much earlier than usual. On this day he examined Madame Gipsy, recalled Cavaillon, and sent again for M. Fauvel. For several days he displayed the same activity. Of all the witnesses summoned, only two failed to appear. One was the messenger sent by Prosper to bring the money from the Bank of France, and who was ill from a fall. The other was M. Raoul de Lagors. But their absence did not prevent the memoranda relating to Prosper's case from daily increasing; and on the ensuing Monday, five days after the robbery, M. Patrigent thought he held in his hands enough moral proof to crush the accused.



WHILE his whole past was the object of the most minute investigations, Prosper was in prison, in solitary confinement. The two first days had not appeared very long to him. He had requested, and been supplied with some sheets of paper, numbered, for they had to be accounted for; and he wrote, with a sort of fury, plans of defense and a narrative of justification.

The third day he began to feel uneasy at not seeing any one except the condemned prisoners employed to serve those undergoing solitary confinement, and the jailer who brought him his food. "Am I not to be examined again?" he would ask.

"Your turn is coming," the jailer invariably answered.

Time passed; and the wretched man, tortured by the sufferings of solitary confinement which quickly breaks the spirit, sank into the depths of despair. "Am I to stay here forever?" he moaned.

No, he was not forgotten; for on the Monday morning, at one o'clock, an hour when the jailer never came, he heard the heavy bolt of his cell pushed back. He ran toward the door. But the sight of a gray-headed man standing there rooted him to the spot.

"Father," he gasped, "father!"

"Your father, yes!"

Prosper's astonishment at seeing his father was instantly suc-

ceeded by a feeling of great joy. A father is the one friend upon whom we can always rely. In the hour of need, when all else fails, we remember him upon whose knees we sat when children, and who soothed our sorrows; and even though he may be unable to assist us, his mere presence serves to comfort and strengthen us.

Without reflecting, Prosper, impelled by tender feeling, was about to throw himself into his father's arms, but M. Bertomy harshly repulsed him. "Do not approach me!" he exclaimed. He then advanced into the cell, and closed the door. The father and son were alone together—Prosper heart-broken, crushed; M. Bertomy angry, almost threatening.

Cast off by his last friend, by his father, the miserable young man seemed to be stupefied with pain and disappointment. "You, too!" he bitterly cried. "You—you believe me guilty? Oh, father!"

"Spare yourself this shameful comedy," interrupted M. Bertomy: "I know all."

"But I am innocent, father; I swear it by the sacred memory of my mother."

"Unhappy wretch!" cried M. Bertomy, "do not blaspheme!" He seemed overcome by tender thoughts of the past, and in a weak, broken voice added: "Your mother is dead, Prosper, and little did I think that the day would come when I could thank God for having taken her from me. Your crime would have killed her, would have broken her heart!"

After a painful silence, Prosper said: "You overwhelm me, father, and at the moment when I need all my courage; when I am the victim of a hideous plot."

"Victim!" cried M. Bertomy, "victim! Dare you utter your insinuations against the honorable man who has taken care of you, loaded you with benefits, and had ensured you a brilliant future! It is enough for you to have robbed him; do not calumniate him."

"For pity's sake, father, let me explain!"

"I suppose you would deny your benefactor's kindness. Yet you were at one time so sure of his affection that you wrote me to hold myself in readiness to come to Paris and ask M. Fauvel for the hand of his niece. Was that, then, a lie?"

"No," said Prosper in a choked voice, "no."

"That was a year ago; you then loved Mademoiselle Madeleine; at least you told me so."

"Father, I love her now, more than ever; I have never ceased to love her."

M. Bertomy made a gesture of contemptuous pity. "Indeed!" he cried. "And the thought of the pure, innocent girl whom you loved did not prevent your entering upon a path of sin. You loved her! How dared you, then, without blushing, approach her presence after associating with the shameless creatures with whom you were so intimate?"

"For heaven's sake, let me explain by what fatality Madeleine—"

"Enough, sir, enough. I told you that I know everything. I saw M. Fauvel yesterday; this morning I saw the magistrate, and 'tis to his kindness that I am indebted for this interview. Do you know what mortification I suffered before being allowed to see you? I was searched and made to empty all my pockets. They suspected I was conveying some weapon to you!"

Prosper ceased to justify himself, but in a helpless, dejected way dropped down upon a seat.

"I have seen your apartments, and at once recognized the proofs of your crime. I saw silk curtains hanging before all the windows and doors and the walls covered with pictures. In my father's house the walls were whitewashed; and there was but one armchair in the whole place, and that was my mother's. Our luxury was our honesty. You are the first member of our family who has possessed Aubusson carpets; though, to be sure, you are the first thief of our blood." At this last insult Prosper's face flushed crimson, but he remained silent and immovable.

"But luxury is necessary now," continued M. Bertomy, becoming more excited and angry as he went on; "luxury must be had at any price. You must have the insolent opulence and display of an upstart, without the upstart's wealth. You must support worthless women who wear satin slippers lined with swan's-down, like those I saw in your rooms, and keep servants in livery—and to do this you steal! Bankers will no longer dare trust the keys of their safes with any one, for every day honest families are disgraced by the discovery of some new piece of villainy."

M. Bertomy suddenly stopped. He saw for the first time that his son was not in a condition to hear his reproaches. "But I will say no more," he added. "I came here not to reproach you, but to save, if possible, the honor of our name, to prevent

it from being published in the papers among the names of thieves and murderers. Stand up and listen to me!" At his father's imperious tone, Prosper arose. So many successive blows had reduced him to a state of torpor.

"First of all," began M. Bertomy, "how much have you remaining of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

"Once more, father," replied the unfortunate man in a tone of hopeless resignation, "once more I swear I am innocent."

"So I supposed you would say. Then our family will have to repair the injury you have done M. Fauvel."

"What do you mean?"

"The day your brother-in-law heard of your crime he brought me your sister's dowry—seventy thousand francs. I succeeded in collecting a hundred and forty thousand francs more. This makes two hundred and ten thousand francs which I have brought with me to give to M. Fauvel."

This threat aroused Prosper from his torpor. "You shall do nothing of the kind!" he cried with unrestrained indignation.

"I will do so before the sun goes down this day. M. Fauvel will grant me time to pay the rest. My pension is fifteen hundred francs. I can live upon five hundred; I am strong enough to go to work again; and your brother-in-law—" M. Bertomy stopped short, frightened at the expression of his son's face. His features were contracted with such furious rage that he was scarcely recognizable, and his eyes glared like a maniac's.

"You dare not disgrace me thus!" cried Prosper; "you have no right to do it. You are free to disbelieve me yourself, but you have no right to take a step which would be a confession of guilt, and ruin me forever. Who and what convinces you of my guilt? When cold justice hesitates, you, my father, hesitate not, but, more pitiless than the law, condemn me unheard!"

"I will do my duty!"

"Which means that I stand on the edge of a precipice, and you push me over! Do you call that your duty? What! between strangers who accuse me, and myself who swear that I am innocent, you do not hesitate? Why? Is it because I am your son? Our honor is at stake, it is true; but that is only the more reason why you should stand by me, and assist me to defend myself."

Prosper's earnest, truthful manner was enough to unsettle the firmest convictions, and make doubt penetrate the most

stubborn mind. "Yet," said M. Bertomy in a hesitating tone, "everything seems to accuse you."

"Ah, father, you do not know that I was suddenly banished from Madeleine's presence; that I was compelled to avoid her. I became desperate, and tried to forget my sorrow in dissipation. I sought oblivion, and found shame and disgust. Oh, Madeleine, Madeleine!" He was overcome with emotion; but in a few minutes he resumed with renewed violence in his voice and manner: "Everything *is* against me; but no matter. I will clear myself or perish. Human justice is liable to error; although innocent, I may be convicted; so be it. I will undergo my penalty; but people are not kept galley-slaves forever."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, father, that I am now another man. My life, henceforth, has an object—vengeance! I am the victim of a vile plot. As long as I have a drop of blood in my veins, I will seek its author. And I will certainly find him; and then bitterly shall he expiate all of my cruel suffering. The blow has come from Fauvel's, and I will seek the villain there."

"Take care: your anger makes you say things that you will repent hereafter."

"Yes, I see, you are going to descant upon the probity of M. Andre Fauvel. You will tell me that all the virtues have taken refuge in the bosom of this patriarchal family. What do you know about it? Would this be the first instance in which the most shameful secrets are concealed beneath the fairest appearances? Why did Madeleine suddenly forbid me to think of her? Why has she exiled me, when she suffers as much from our separation as I myself, when she still loves me? For she does love me. I am sure of it. I have proofs of it."

The jailer here came to say that the time allotted to M. Bertomy had expired, and that he must leave the cell. A thousand conflicting emotions seemed to rend the old man's heart. Suppose Prosper were telling the truth: how great would be his own remorse, if he had added to the frightful weight of sorrow and trouble his son already had to bear! And who could prove that he was not sincere in what he said?

The voice of his son, of whom he had ever been proud, had aroused all his paternal affection which he had so violently repressed. Ah, were he guilty, and guilty of a worse crime, still he was his son, his only son! His countenance lost its severity, and his eyes filled with tears. He wished to leave

as he had entered, stern and angry, but he had not the cruel courage. His heart was breaking. He opened his arms, and pressed Prosper to his breast. "Oh, my son!" he murmured, "God grant you have spoken the truth!"

Prosper was triumphant: he had almost convinced his father of his innocence. But he had no time to rejoice over this victory. The cell door again opened, and the jailer's gruff voice called out: "It is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper instantly obeyed the summons. His step was no longer unsteady, as a few days previous: a complete change had come over him. He walked firmly, with his head erect, and the fire of resolution in his eye. He knew the way now, and he proceeded a little ahead of the officer who escorted him. As he was passing through the room full of police agents, he encountered the individual with the gold spectacles, who had watched him so intently the day he was searched. "Courage, M. Prosper Bertomy," he said; "if you are innocent, there are those who will help you."

Prosper started with surprise, and was about to reply, when the man disappeared. "Who is that gentleman?" he asked of the officer who was escorting him.

"Is it possible that you don't know him?" replied the man with surprise. "Why, it is M. Lecoq of the detective service."

"You say his name is Lecoq?"

"You might as well say 'Monsieur Lecoq,'" said the offended official; "it would not burn your mouth. M. Lecoq is a man who knows everything that he wants to know, without its ever being told to him. If your case had been in his hands instead of in those of that smooth-tongued, imbecile Fanferlot, it would have been settled long ago. Nobody is allowed to waste time when he is in command. But he seems to be a friend of yours."

"I never saw him until the first day I came here."

"You can't swear to that, because no one can boast of knowing the real face of M. Lecoq. It is one thing to-day, and another to-morrow; sometimes he is a dark man, sometimes a fair one, sometimes quite young, and then an octogenarian. Why, at times he even deceives me. I begin to talk to a stranger—bah! it turns out to be M. Lecoq! Anybody on the face of the earth might be he. If I were told that you were he, I should say: 'Very likely it is so.' Ah! he can convert himself into any form he pleases. He is a wonderful man!"

The speaker would have continued forever his praises of M. Lecoq, had not the sight of the magistrate's room put an end to them.

This time, Prosper was not kept waiting on the wooden bench; on the contrary, the magistrate was waiting for him. M. Patrigent, who was a profound observer of human nature, had contrived the interview between M. Bertomy and his son. He was certain that between the father, a man of such stubborn honor, and the son, accused of theft, an affecting scene would take place, and this scene would completely unman Prosper, and induce him to confess. He determined to send for him as soon as the interview was over, while his nerves were vibrating with terrible emotions: he would then tell the truth, to relieve his troubled, despairing mind.

The magistrate's surprise therefore was great to see the cashier's bearing; resolute without obstinacy, firm and assured without defiance. "Well," he said to him, "have you reflected?"

"Not being guilty, sir, I had nothing to reflect upon."

"Ah, I see the prison has not been a good counselor; you forget that sincerity and repentance are the first things necessary to obtain the indulgence of the law."

"I crave no indulgence, sir."

M. Patrigent looked vexed, and said: "What would you say if I told you what had become of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

Prosper shook his head sadly. "If it were known, sir, I should not be here, but at liberty."

This device had often been used by the magistrate, and had generally succeeded; but, with a man so thoroughly master of himself as Prosper then was, there was small chance of success on this occasion. It had been used at a venture, and had failed. "Then you persist in accusing M. Fauvel?" remarked M. Patrigent.

"Him, or some one else."

"Excuse me: no one else, since he alone knew the word. Had he any interest in robbing himself?"

"I can think of none."

"Well, now I will tell you what interest you had in robbing him."

M. Patrigent spoke as a man who was convinced of the facts he was about to state; but his assurance was all assumed. He had relied upon crushing at a blow a despairing, wretched

man, and was nonplused by seeing him appear so determined upon resistance. "Will you be good enough to tell me," he said in a vexed tone, "how much you have spent during the last year?"

Prosper did not find it necessary to stop to reflect and calculate. "Yes, sir," he answered, unhesitatingly. "Circumstances made it necessary for me to preserve the greatest order in my wild career; I spent about fifty thousand francs."

"Where did you obtain them?"

"In the first place, twelve thousand francs were left to me by my mother. I received from M. Fauvel fourteen thousand francs for my salary, and share of the profits. By speculating on the Bourse I gained eight thousand francs. The rest I borrowed, and intend repaying out of the fifteen thousand francs which I have deposited in M. Fauvel's bank." The account was clear, exact, and could be easily proved; it must be a true one.

"Who lent you the money?" inquired M. Patrigent.

"M. Raoul de Lagors." This witness had left Paris the day of the robbery, and could not be found; so for the time being, M. Patrigent was compelled to rely upon Prosper's word.

"Well," he said, "I will not press this point. Tell me why, in spite of M. Fauvel's formal order, you drew the money from the Bank of France the night before, instead of waiting till the morning of the payment?"

"Because M. de Clameran had informed me that it would be convenient, necessary even, for him to have his money early in the morning. He will testify to that fact, if you summon him; and I knew that I should reach my office late."

"Then M. de Clameran is a friend of yours?"

"By no means. I have always had an aversion to him, which there was nothing whatever to justify; he is, however, the intimate friend of M. de Lagors."

While Sigault was writing down these answers, M. Patrigent was racking his brain to imagine what could have occurred between M. Bertomy and his son to cause this transformation in Prosper. "One thing more," said the magistrate: "how did you spend your evening the night of the crime?"

"When I left my office, at five o'clock, I took the St. Germain train, and went to Vesinet to M. de Lagors's country house, to return him fifteen hundred francs which he had asked for; and, not finding him at home, I left the money with his servant."

"Did the latter tell you that M. de Lagors was going away?"

"No, sir. I did not know that he had left Paris."

"Where did you go when you left Vesinet?"

"I returned to Paris, and dined at a restaurant with a friend."

"And then?" Prosper hesitated.

"You are silent," said M. Patrigent. "I will therefore tell you how you employed your time. You returned to your rooms in the Rue Chaptal, dressed yourself, and went to a party given by one of those women who style themselves dramatic artists, and who are a disgrace to the stage; who receive salaries of a hundred crowns a year, and yet keep their carriages. You went to Mademoiselle Wilson's."

"You are right, sir."

"There is heavy playing at Wilson's?"

"Sometimes."

"You are in the habit of visiting places of this sort. Were you not connected in some way with a scandalous affair which took place at the house of a woman named Crescenzi?"

"I was summoned to give evidence, having been witness of a theft."

"Gambling generally leads to stealing. And did you not play baccarat at Wilson's, and lose eighteen hundred francs?"

"Excuse me, sir, only eleven hundred."

"Very well. In the morning you paid a bill that fell due of a thousand francs."

"Yes, sir."

"Moreover, there remained in your desk five hundred francs, and you had four hundred in your purse when you were arrested. So that altogether, in twenty-four hours, four thousand five hundred francs—"

Prosper was not discountenanced, but amazed. Not being aware of the powerful means of investigation which the law has at its command, he wondered how the magistrate could have obtained such accurate information in so short a time. "Your statement is correct, sir," he finally said.

"Where did all this money come from? The evening before you had so little that you were obliged to defer the payment of a small account."

"The day to which you allude I sold some bonds I had, through an agent, which realized about three thousand francs. In addition I took from the safe two thousand francs in advance of my salary. I have nothing to conceal."

Prosper had given clear answers to all questions put to him, and M. Patrigent thought he would now attack him from a new point. "You say you have no wish to conceal any of your actions; then why this note stealthily thrown to one of your companions?" Here he held up the mysterious note.

This time the blow struck. Prosper's eyes dropped before the inquiring look of the magistrate. "I thought," he stammered, "I wished—"

"You wished to hide your mistress?"

"Well, yes, sir, I did. I knew that a man in my condition, accused of a robbery, has every fault, every weakness he has ever indulged in, charged against him as a great crime."

"Which means that you knew that the presence of a woman at your apartments would tell very much against you, and that justice would not excuse this scandalous defiance of public morality. A man who respects himself so little as to live with a worthless woman does not elevate her to his standard, but descends to her base level."

"Sir!"

"I suppose you know who the woman is, whom you permit to bear the honest name borne by your mother?"

"Madame Gipsy was a governess when I first knew her. She was born at Oporto, and came to France with a Portuguese family."

"Her name is not Gipsy: she has never been a governess, and she is not a Portuguese."

Prosper began to protest against this statement; but M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders, and after looking over a lot of papers on his desk, said: "Ah, here it is; listen: Palmyre Chocareille, born at Paris in 1840, daughter of James Chocareille, undertaker's assistant, and of Caroline Piedlent, his wife."

Prosper looked vexed and impatient; he was not aware that the magistrate was reading him this report in order to convince him that nothing can escape the police. "Palmyre Chocareille," continued M. Patrigent, "was apprenticed at twelve years of age to a shoemaker, and remained with him until she was sixteen. Traces of her for one year are lost. At the age of seventeen she was hired as a servant by a grocer in the Rue St. Denis, named Dombas, and remained with him three months. She entered during this same year, 1857, eight different situations. In 1858 she entered the service of a dealer in fans in the Passage Choiseul."

As he read, the magistrate watched Prosper's face to observe the effect of these revelations. "Toward the close of 1858," continued he, "she was employed as a servant by Madame Nunes, and accompanied her to Lisbon. How long she remained in Lisbon, and what she did while she remained there, is not reported. But in 1861 she returned to Paris, and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment for assault and battery. Ah, she returned from Portugal with the name of Nina Gipsy."

"But I assure you, sir—" Prosper began.

"Yes, I understand: this history is less romantic, doubtless, than the one related to you; but then it has the merit of being true. We lose sight of Palmyre Chocareille, called Gipsy, upon her release from prison; but we meet her again six months later, she having made the acquaintance of a commercial traveler named Caldas, who became infatuated with her beauty, and furnished some rooms for her near the Bastille. She assumed his name for some time, then she deserted him to devote herself to you. Did you ever hear of this Caldas?"

"Never, sir."

"This foolish man so deeply loved this creature that her desertion drove him almost insane through grief. He was very resolute, and publicly swore that he would kill his rival if he ever found him. The current report afterward was, that he committed suicide. He certainly sold the furniture of the house occupied by the woman Chocareille, and suddenly disappeared. All the efforts made to discover him proved fruitless."

The magistrate paused a moment as if to give Prosper time for reflection, and then slowly said: "And this is the woman whom you made your companion, the woman for whom you robbed the bank!"

Once more M. Patrigent was on the wrong track, owing to Fanferlot's incomplete information. He had hoped that Prosper would betray himself by uttering some passionate retort when thus wounded to the quick; but the latter remained impassible. Of all that the magistrate had said to him his mind dwelt upon only one word—"Caldas," the name of the poor commercial traveler who had killed himself.

"At any rate," insisted M. Patrigent, "you will confess that this girl has caused your ruin."

"I can not confess that, sir, for it is not true."

"Yet she is the cause of your extravagance. "Listen"—the

magistrate here drew a bill from the file of papers—"during December you paid her dressmaker, Van Klopen, for two outdoor costumes, nine hundred francs; one evening dress, seven hundred francs; one domino, trimmed with lace, four hundred francs."

"I spent that money of my own free will; but, nevertheless, I was not in the least attached to her."

M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders. "You can not deny the evidence," said he. "I suppose you will also say that it was not for this girl's sake you ceased spending your evenings at M. Fauvel's?"

"I assure you that she was not the cause of my ceasing to visit M. Fauvel's family."

"Then why did you suddenly break off your attentions to a young lady whom you confidently expected to marry, and whose hand you had written to your father to ask for you?"

"I had reasons which I can not reveal," answered Prosper with emotion.

The magistrate breathed freely; at last he had discovered a vulnerable point in the prisoner's armor. "Did Mademoiselle Madeleine banish you from her presence?" Prosper was silent, and seemed agitated. "Speak," said M. Patrigent; "I must tell you that this is one of the most important circumstances in your case."

"Whatever the cost may be, on this subject I am compelled to keep silence."

"Beware of what you do; justice will not be satisfied with scruples of conscience." M. Patrigent waited for an answer. None came.

"You persist in your obstinacy, do you?" continued he. "Well, we will go on to the next question. You have, during the last year, spent fifty thousand francs. Your resources are at an end, and your credit is exhausted; to continue your mode of life was impossible. What did you intend to do?"

"I had no settled plan. I thought it might last as long as it would, and then I—"

"And then you would abstract money from the safe; was it not so?"

"Ah, sir, if I were guilty I should not be here! I should never have been such a fool as to return to the bank; I should have fled."

M. Patrigent could not restrain a smile of satisfaction, and

exclaimed: "Exactly the argument I expected you to use. You showed your shrewdness precisely by staying to face the storm, instead of flying the country. Several recent cases have taught dishonest cashiers that flight abroad is dangerous. Railways travel fast, but telegrams travel faster. A French thief can be arrested in London within forty-eight hours after his description has been telegraphed. Even America is no longer a refuge. You remained, prudently and wisely, saying to yourself: 'I will manage to avoid suspicion; and, even if I am found out, I shall be free again after three or five years' seclusion, with a large fortune to enjoy.' Many people would sacrifice five years of their lives for three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"But, sir, had I calculated in the manner you describe, I should not have been content with three hundred and fifty thousand francs—I should have waited for an opportunity to steal a million. I often had that sum in my charge."

"Oh! it is not always convenient to wait."

Prosper was buried in deep thought for some minutes. "Sir," he finally said, "there is one detail I forgot to mention before, and it may be of importance."

"Explain, if you please."

"The messenger whom I sent to the Bank of France for the money must have seen me tie up the bundles of notes and put them away in the safe. At any rate, he knows that I left my office before he did."

"Very well; the man shall be examined. Now you can return to your cell; and once more I advise you to consider the consequences of your persistent denial." M. Patrigent thus abruptly dismissed Prosper because he wished to act immediately upon this last piece of information.

"Sigault," said he, as soon as Prosper had left the room, "is not this messenger the man who was excused from being examined from his having sent a doctor's certificate declaring him too ill to appear?"

"It is, sir."

"Where does he live?"

"Fanferlot says he was so ill that he was taken to the hospital—the Dubois Hospital."

"Very good. I am going to examine him to-day, this very hour. Take your pen and paper, and send for a cab."

It was some distance from the Palais de Justice to the Dubois Hospital; but the cabman, urged by the promise of a handsome

present for himself, made his sorry jades fly as if they were blood horses.

Would the messenger be able to answer any questions? That was the point. The physician in charge of the hospital said that, although the man suffered severely from a broken knee, his mind was perfectly clear. "That being the case," said the magistrate, "I wish to examine him, and desire that no one be admitted while he makes his deposition."

"Oh! you will not be intruded upon; his room contains four beds, but with the exception of his own they are just now all unoccupied."

When the messenger saw the magistrate enter, followed by a tall, thin young man with a portfolio under his arm, he at once knew what they had come for. "Ah," he said, "you have come to see me about M. Bertomy's affair?"—"Precisely."

M. Patrigent remained standing by the sick-bed while Sigault arranged his papers on a little table. In answer to the usual questions, the messenger stated that he was named Antonin Poche, was forty years old, born at Cadaujac in the Gironde, and was unmarried.

"Now," said the magistrate, "are you well enough to answer clearly any questions I may put to you?"

"Yes, certainly, sir."

"Did you, on the 27th of February, go to the Bank of France for the three hundred and fifty thousand francs that were stolen?"—"Yes, sir."

"At what hour did you return with the money?"

"It must have been five o'clock when I got back."

"Do you remember what M. Bertomy did when you handed him the notes? Now, do not be in a hurry; think before you answer the question."

"Let me see: first he counted the notes, and made them up into four packages; then he put them in the safe, which he afterward locked, and then—it seems to me—yes, I am not mistaken, he went out!"

He uttered these last words with so much energy that, forgetting his knee, he half started up in bed, giving vent at the same time to a cry of pain.

"Are you sure of what you say?" asked the magistrate.

M. Patrigent's solemn tone seemed to frighten Antonin. "Sure!" he exclaimed with marked hesitation; "I would bet my head on it, yet I am not more sure than that!"

It was impossible to get him to be more precise in his answers. He had been frightened. He already imagined himself compromised, and for a trifle would have retracted everything. But the effect was none the less produced, and when they retired M. Patrigent said to Sigault: "This is a very important piece of evidence."

VI

THE hotel of the Grand Archangel, Madame Gipsy's asylum, was the most elegant one on the Quai St. Michel. At this hotel a person who pays her fortnight's board in advance is treated with marked consideration.

Madame Alexandre, who had been a handsome woman, was now stout, laced till she could scarcely breathe, always overdressed, and fond of wearing a number of flashy gold chains around her fat neck. She had bright eyes and white teeth; but, alas, a red nose. Of all her weaknesses—and heaven knows she had indulged in every variety—only one remained; she loved a good dinner, washed down with plenty of good wine. But she loved her husband; and, about the time M. Patrigent was leaving the hospital, she began to feel worried because her "little man" had not returned to dinner. She was about to sit down without him, when the waiter cried out: "Here is master." And Fanferlot appeared in person.

Three years before, Fanferlot had kept a little private inquiry office; Madame Alexandre dealt without a license in perfumery and toilet articles, and, finding it necessary to have some of her doubtful customers watched, engaged Fanferlot's services; this was the origin of their acquaintance.

If they went through the marriage ceremony for the good of the mayoralty and the church, it was because they imagined it would, like a baptism, wash out the sins of the past. Upon this momentous day Fanferlot gave up his private inquiry office, and entered the police, where he had already been occasionally employed, and Madame Alexandre retired from business.

Uniting their savings, they hired and furnished the Grand Archangel, which they were now carrying on prosperously, esteemed by their neighbors, who were ignorant of Fanferlot's connection with the police force.

"Why, how late you are, my little man!" exclaimed Madame Alexandre as she dropped her knife and fork, and rushed forward to embrace her husband.

Fanferlot received her caresses with an air of abstraction. "My back is broken," he said. "I have been the whole day playing billiards with Evariste, M. Fauvel's valet, and allowed him to win as often as he wished—a man who does not know what pool is! I became acquainted with him yesterday, and now I am his best friend. If I wish to enter M. Fauvel's service in Antonin's place, I can rely upon Evariste's good word."

"What, you be an office messenger? you?"

"Of course I would. How else am I to get an opportunity of studying my characters, if I am not on the spot to continually watch them?"

"Then the valet gave you no information?"

"None that I could make use of, and yet I turned him inside out like a glove. This banker is a remarkable man; you don't often meet with one of his sort nowadays. Evariste says he has not a single vice, not even a little defect by which his valet could gain ten sous. He neither smokes, drinks, nor plays; in fact, he is a saint. He is worth millions, and lives as respectably and quietly as a grocer He is devoted to his wife, adores his children, is very hospitable, but seldom goes into society."

"Then his wife is young?"

"No, she must be about fifty."

Madame Alexandre reflected a minute, then asked: "Did you inquire about the other members of the family?"

"Certainly. The younger son is in the army. The elder son, Lucien, lives with his parents, and is altogether as proper as a young lady. He is so good, indeed, that he is perfectly stupid."

"And what about the niece?"

"Evariste could tell me nothing about her."

Madame Alexandre shrugged her fat shoulders. "If you have discovered nothing," she said, "it is because there is nothing to be discovered. Still, do you know what I would do if I were you?"

"Tell me."

"I would consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot jumped up as if he had been shot. "Now, that's pretty advice!" he exclaimed. "Do you want me to lose my place? M. Lecoq does not suspect that I have anything to do with the case, excepting to obey his orders."

"Nobody told you to let him know you were investigating it on your own account. You can consult him with an air of indifference, as if you were not at all interested; and, after you have got his opinion, you can take advantage of it."

The detective weighed his wife's words, and then said: "Perhaps you are right; yet M. Lecoq is so deucedly shrewd that he might see through me."

"Shrewd!" echoed Madame Alexandre; "shrewd! All of you at the Prefecture say that so often that he has gained his reputation by it. You are just as sharp as he is."

"Well, we will see. I will think the matter over; but, in the mean time, what does the girl say?" The "girl" was Madame Nina Gipsy.

In taking up her abode at the Grand Archangel, Madame Nina thought she was following good advice; and, as Fanferlot had never appeared in her presence since, she was still under the impression that she had obeyed a friend of Prosper's. When she received her summons from M. Patrigent, she admired the wonderful skill of the police in discovering her hiding-place; for she had established herself at the hotel under a false, or rather her true, name, Palmyre Chocareille. Artfully questioned by her inquisitive landlady, she had, without any mistrust, confided her history to her. Thus Fanferlot was able to impress the magistrate with the idea of his being a skilful detective, when he pretended to have discovered all this information from a variety of sources.

"She is still upstairs," replied Madame Alexandre. "She suspects nothing; but to keep her in the house becomes every day more difficult. I don't know what the magistrate told her, but she came home quite beside herself with anger. She wanted to go and make a fuss at M. Fauvel's. Then she wrote a letter, which she told Jean to post for her; but I kept it to show you."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "you have a letter, and did not tell me before? Perhaps it contains the clue to the mystery. Give it to me, quick."

Obeying her husband, Madame Alexandre opened a little cup-

board and took out a letter, which she handed to him. "Here, take it," she said, "and be satisfied."

Considering that she used to be a chambermaid, Palmyre Chocareille, since become Madame Gipsy, wrote well. Her letter bore the following address, written in a free, flowing hand:

"M. L. DE CLAMERAN,
"Forgemaster, Hotel du Louvre.
"To be handed to M. Raoul de Lagors.
"(Immediate.)"

"Oh, ho!" said Fanferlot, accompanying his exclamation with a little whistle, as was his habit when he thought he had made a grand discovery. "Oh, ho!"

"Are you going to open it?" inquired Madame Alexandre.

"A little bit," said Fanferlot, as he dexterously opened the envelope.

Madame Alexandre leaned over her husband's shoulder, and they both read the following:

"MONSIEUR RAOUL—Prosper is in prison, accused of a robbery which he never committed. I wrote to you three days ago."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "this silly girl wrote, and I never saw the letter?"

"But, little man, she must have posted it herself the day she went to the Palais de Justice."

"Very likely," said Fanferlot, propitiated. He continued reading:

"I wrote to you three days ago, and have no reply. Who will help Prosper if his best friends desert him? If you don't answer this letter, I shall consider myself released from a certain promise, and without scruple will tell Prosper of the conversation I overheard between you and M. de Clameran. But I can count on you, can I not? I shall expect you at the Grand Archangel, on the Quai St. Michel, the day after tomorrow, between twelve and four. NINA GIPSY."

The letter read, Fanferlot at once proceeded to copy it.

"Well!" said Madame Alexandre, "what do you think?"

Fanferlot was delicately refastening the letter when the door of the hotel office was abruptly opened, and the waiter twice whispered: "Pst! Pst!"

Fanferlot rapidly disappeared into a dark closet. He had barely time to close the door before Madame Gipsy entered the room. The poor girl was sadly changed. She was pale and hollow-cheeked, and her eyes were red with weeping.

On seeing her, Madame Alexandre could not conceal her surprise. "Why, my child, you are not going out?" said she.

"I am obliged to do so, madame; and I have come to ask you to tell any one that may call during my absence to wait until I return."

"But where in the world are you going at this hour, unwell as you are?"

For a moment Madame Gipsy hesitated. "Oh," she said, "you are so kind that I am tempted to confide in you; read this note which a messenger just now brought to me."

"What!" cried Madame Alexandre perfectly aghast; "a messenger enter my house, and go up to your room!"

"Is there anything surprising in that?"

"No, oh, no! nothing surprising." And in a tone loud enough to be heard in the closet, Madame Alexandre read the note:

"A friend of Prosper's who can neither receive you, nor present himself at your hotel, is very anxious to speak to you. Be in the omnibus office opposite the tower of Saint Jacques to-night at nine precisely, and the writer will be there, and tell you what he has to say.

"I have appointed this public place for the rendezvous so as to relieve your mind of all fear."

"And you are going to this rendezvous?"

"Certainly, madame."

"But it is imprudent, foolish: it is a snare to entrap you."

"It makes no difference," interrupted Nina. "I am so unfortunate already that I have nothing more to dread. Any change would be a relief." And, without waiting to hear any more, she went off. The door had scarcely closed upon her before Fanferlot bounced from the closet.

The mild detective was white with rage, and swore violently. "What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Am I to stand by and have people walking all over the Grand Archangel as if it were a public street?" Madame Alexandre stood trembling, and dared not speak. "Was ever such impudence heard of before!" he continued. "A messenger comes into my house

and goes upstairs without being seen by anybody! I will look into this. And the idea of you, Madame Alexandre, you, a sensible woman, being idiotic enough to try and persuade that little viper not to keep the appointment!"

"But, my dear—"

"Had you not sense enough to know that I would follow her, and discover what she is attempting to conceal? Come, make haste and help me, so that she won't recognize me."

In a few minutes Fanferlot was completely disguised by a thick beard, a wig, and a linen blouse, and looked for all the world like one of those disreputable working men who go about seeking for employment, and, at the same time, hoping they may not find any.

"Have you your life-preserver?" asked the solicitous Madame Alexandre.

"Yes, yes; make haste and have that letter to M. de Clameran posted, and keep on the lookout." And without listening to his wife, who called after him, "Good luck," Fanferlot darted into the street.

Madame Gipsy had some minutes' start of him; but he ran up the street he knew she must have taken, and overtook her on the Pont-au-Change. She was walking with the uncertain manner of a person who, impatient to be at a rendezvous, has started too soon, and is obliged to occupy the intervening time. First she would walk slowly, then quicken her steps, and proceed very rapidly. She strolled up and down the Place du Chatelet several times, read the theatre-bills, and finally seated herself on a bench. One minute before a quarter to nine she entered the omnibus office and sat down.

A moment afterward Fanferlot entered; but, as he feared that Madame Gipsy might recognize him in spite of his beard, he took a seat at the opposite end of the room, in a dark corner. "Singular place for a conversation," he thought, as he watched the young woman. "Who in the world can have made this appointment in an omnibus office? Judging from her evident curiosity and uneasiness, I could swear she has not the faintest idea for whom she is waiting."

Meanwhile, the office was rapidly filling with people. Every minute an official would shout out the destination of an omnibus which had just arrived, and the passengers would rush in to obtain tickets, hoping to be able to proceed by it.

As each newcomer entered, Nina would tremble, and Fan-

ferlot would say, "This must be him!" Finally, as the Hotel de Ville clock was striking nine, a man entered, and, without going to the ticket-desk, walked directly up to Nina, bowed, and took a seat beside her. He was of medium size, rather stout, with a crimson face, and fiery-red whiskers. His dress was that of a well-to-do merchant, and there was nothing in his manner or appearance to excite attention.

Fanferlot watched him eagerly. "Well, my friend," he said to himself, "in future I shall recognize you, no matter where we meet; and this very evening I will find out who you are." Despite his intent listening, Fanferlot could not hear a word spoken by either the stranger or Nina. All he could do was to judge what the subject of their conversation might be by their gestures.

When the stout man bowed and spoke to her, Madame Gipsy looked so surprised that it was evident she had never seen him before. When he sat down by her, and said a few words, she started up with a frightened air, as if seeking to escape. A single word and look made her resume her seat. Then, as the stout man went on talking, Nina's attitude betrayed a certain apprehension. She evidently refused to do something required of her; then suddenly she seemed to consent, when a good reason was given for her doing so. At one moment she appeared ready to weep, and the next her pretty face was illumined by a bright smile. Finally she shook hands with her companion, as if she were confirming a promise.

"What can all this mean?" said Fanferlot to himself, as he sat in his dark corner, biting his nails. "What an idiot I am to have stationed myself so far off!" He was thinking how he could manage to approach nearer without arousing their suspicions, when the stout man rose, offered his arm to Madame Gipsy, who accepted it without hesitation, and they walked together toward the door.

They were so engrossed with each other, that Fanferlot thought he could, without risk, follow them closely; and it was well he did, for the crowd was dense outside, and he would soon have lost sight of them. Reaching the door, he saw the stout man and Nina cross the pavement, hail a cab, and enter it.

"Very good," muttered Fanferlot, "I've got them now. There is no need to hurry."

While the driver was gathering up his reins, Fanferlot pre-

pared himself; and, when the cab started, he set off at a brisk trot, determined upon following it to the end of the earth.

The cab proceeded along the Boulevard Sebastopol. It went pretty fast; but it was not for nothing that Fanferlot had been dubbed the Squirrel. With his elbows glued to his sides, and economizing his wind, he ran on. By the time he had reached the Boulevard St. Denis, he began to get winded, and stiff from the pain in his side. The cabman abruptly turned into the Rue Faubourg St. Martin.

But Fanferlot, who, at eight years of age, had played about the streets of Paris, was not to be baffled; he was a man of resources. He seized hold of the springs of the cab, raised himself up by the strength of his wrists, and hung on, with his legs resting on the axletree of the hind wheels. He was not particularly comfortable, but then he no longer ran the risk of being distanced. "Now," he chuckled, behind his false beard, "you may drive as fast as you please, cabby."

The man whipped up his horses, and drove furiously along the hilly street of the Faubourg St. Martin. Finally the cab stopped in front of a wine-shop, and the driver jumped down from his seat, and went in.

The detective also left his uncomfortable post, and crouching in a doorway waited for Nina and her companion to alight, with the intention of following closely upon their heels. Five minutes passed, and still there were no signs of them. "What can they be doing all this time?" grumbled the detective. With great precautions he approached the cab and peeped in. Oh, cruel deception! it was empty!

Fanferlot felt as if some one had thrown a bucket of ice-water over him; he remained rooted to the spot with his mouth open, the picture of blank bewilderment. He soon recovered his wits sufficiently to burst forth into a volley of oaths, loud enough to rattle all the window-panes in the neighborhood. "Tricked!" he cried, "fooled! Ah! but won't I make them pay for this!"

In a moment his quick mind had run over the gamut of possibilities, probable and improbable. "Evidently," he muttered, "this fellow and Nina entered by one door and got out by the other; the trick is simple enough. If they resorted to it, 'tis because they feared being followed. If they feared being followed, they have uneasy consciences, therefore—" He suddenly interrupted his monologue as the idea struck him that he had better endeavor to find out something from the driver.

Unfortunately, the driver was in a very surly mood, and not only refused to answer, but shook his whip in so threatening a manner that Fanferlot deemed it prudent to beat a retreat. "Oh, hang it!" he muttered, "perhaps the driver is mixed up in the affair also!"

But what could he do now at this time of night? He could not imagine. He walked dejectedly back to the quay, and it was half-past eleven when he reached his own door. "Has the little fool returned?" he inquired of Madame Alexandre the instant she let him in.

"No; but here are two large bundles which have come for her."

Fanferlot hastily opened them. They contained three cotton dresses, some heavy shoes, and some linen caps. "Well," said the detective in a vexed tone, "now she is going to disguise herself. Upon my word, I am getting puzzled! What can she be up to?"

When Fanferlot was sulkily walking down the Faubourg St. Martin he had fully made up his mind that he would not tell his wife of his discomfiture. But once at home, confronted with a new fact of a nature to negative all his conjectures, his vanity disappeared. He confessed everything—his hopes so nearly realized, his strange mischance, and his suspicions. They talked the matter over and finally decided that they would not go to bed until Madame Gipsy, from whom Madame Alexandre was determined to obtain an explanation of what had happened, returned. At one o'clock the worthy couple were about giving over all hope of her reappearance when they heard the bell ring.

Fanferlot instantly slipped into the closet, and Madame Alexandre remained in the office to receive Nina. "Here you are at last, my dear child!" she cried. "Oh, I have been so uneasy, so afraid lest some misfortune had happened!"

"Thanks for your kind interest, madame. Has a bundle been sent here for me?"

Poor Nina's appearance had strikingly changed; she was still sad, but no longer dejected as she had been. To her prostration of the last few days had succeeded a firm and generous resolution, which was betrayed in her sparkling eyes and resolute step.

"Yes, two bundles came for you; here they are. I suppose you saw M. Bertomy's friend?"

"Yes, madame, and his advice has so changed my plans that, I regret to say, I must leave you to-morrow."

"Going away to-morrow! then something must have happened."

"Oh! nothing that would interest you, madame."

After lighting her candle at the gas-burner, Madame Gipsy said "Good night" in a very significant way, and left the room.

"And what do you think of that, Madame Alexandre?" asked Fanferlot, as he emerged from his hiding-place.

"It is incredible! This girl writes to M. de Lagors to meet her here, and then does not wait for him."

"She evidently mistrusts us; she knows who I am."

"Then this friend of the cashier must have told her."

"Nobody knows who told her. I begin to think that I have to do with some very knowing thieves. They guess I am on their track, and are trying to escape me. I should not be at all surprised if this little rogue has the money herself, and intends to run off with it to-morrow."

"That is not my opinion; but listen to me, you had better take my advice, and consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot meditated awhile, then exclaimed: "Very well; I will see him, just for your satisfaction; because I know that if I have not discovered anything, neither will he. But if he takes upon himself to be domineering, it won't do; for only let him show his insolence to me, and *I* will let him know his place!"

Notwithstanding this brave speech, the detective passed an uneasy night, and at six o'clock the next morning he was up—it was necessary to rise very early if one wished to catch M. Lecoq at home—and, refreshed by a cup of strong coffee, he directed his steps toward the dwelling of the famous detective.

Fanferlot the Squirrel was certainly not afraid of his chief, as he called him, for he started off with his nose in the air and his hat cocked on one side. But by the time he reached the Rue Montmartre, where M. Lecoq lived, his courage had vanished; he pulled his hat over his eyes, and hung his head, as if looking for relief among the paving-stones. He slowly ascended the stairs, pausing several times, and looking around as if he would like to fly. Finally he reached the third floor, and stood before a door decorated with the arms of the famous detective—a cock, the symbol of vigilance—and his heart failed him so that he had scarcely the courage to ring the bell.

The door was opened by Janouille, M. Lecoq's old servant, who had very much the manner and appearance of a grenadier.

She was as faithful to her master as a watchdog, and always stood ready to attack any one who did not treat him with the august respect which she considered his due. "Well, M. Fanferlot," she said, "you come at a right time for once in your life. The chief is waiting to see you."

Upon this announcement Fanferlot was seized with a violent desire to retreat. By what chance could Lecoq be waiting for him? While he thus hesitated, Janouille seized him by the arm and pulled him in, saying: "Do you want to take root there? Come along, the master is busy at work in his study."

Seated at a desk in the middle of a large room, half library and half theatrical dressing-room, furnished in a curious style, was the same individual with gold spectacles who had said to Prosper at the Prefecture, "Have courage." This was M. Lecoq in his official character.

Fanferlot on his entrance advanced respectfully, bowing till his backbone was a perfect curve. M. Lecoq laid down his pen, and, looking sharply at him, said: "Ah, so here you are, young man. Well, it seems that you haven't made much progress in Bertomy's case."

"What," murmured Fanferlot, "you know—"

"I know that you have muddled everything until you can't see your way out; so that you are ready to give in."

"But, M. Lecoq, it was not I—"

M. Lecoq rose, and walked up and down the room; suddenly he confronted Fanferlot, and said in a tone of scornful irony: "What would you think, Master Squirrel, of a man who abuses the confidence of those who employ him, who reveals just enough to lead the prosecution on the wrong scent, who sacrifices to his own foolish vanity the cause of justice and the liberty of an unfortunate prisoner?"

Fanferlot started back with a scared look. "I should say," he stammered, "I should say—"

"You would say this man ought to be punished, and dismissed from his employment; and you are right. The less a profession is honored, the more honorable should those be who belong to it. And yet you have been false to yours. Ah! Master Squirrel, we are ambitious, and we try to make the police service forward our own views! We let justice go astray, and we go on a different tack. One must be a more cunning bloodhound than you are, my friend, to be able to hunt without a huntsman. You are too self-reliant by half."

"But, my chief, I swear—"

"Silence! Do you pretend to say that you did your duty, and told all you knew to the investigating magistrate? While others were giving information against the cashier, you were getting up evidence against the banker. You watch his movements: you become intimate with his valet."

Was M. Lecoq really angry, or pretending to be so? Fanferlot, who knew him well, was puzzled as to whether all this indignation was real.

"Still, if you were only skilful," continued M. Lecoq, "it would be another matter; but no: you wish to be master, and you are not even fit to be a journeyman."

"You are right, my chief," said Fanferlot piteously, for he saw that it was useless for him to deny anything. "But how could I go about an affair like this, where there was not even a trace, a sign of any kind to start from?"

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders. "You are an ass!" exclaimed he. "Why, don't you know that on the very day you were sent for with the commissary to verify the fact of the robbery, you held—I do not say certainly, but very probably held—in your great stupid hands the means of knowing which key had been used when the money was stolen?"

"How is that?"

"You want to know, do you? I will tell you. Do you remember the scratch you discovered on the safe? You were so struck by it that you could not refrain from calling out directly you saw it. You carefully examined it, and were convinced that it was a fresh scratch, only a few hours old. You thought, and rightly too, that this scratch was made at the time of the theft. Now, with what was it made? Evidently with a key. That being the case, you should have asked for the keys both of the banker and the cashier. One of them would have probably had some particles of the hard green paint sticking to it."

Fanferlot listened with open mouth to this explanation. At the last words, he violently slapped his forehead with his hand and cried out: "Idiot! idiot!"

"You have correctly named yourself," said M. Lecoq. "Idiot! This proof stares you right in the face, and you don't see it! This scratch is the only clue there is to follow, and you must like a fool neglect it. If I find the guilty party, it will be by means of this scratch; and I am determined that I will find him."

At a distance the Squirrel very bravely abuses and defies M. Lecoq, but in his presence he yields to the influence which this extraordinary man exercises upon all who approach him. This exact information, these minute details just given him, so upset his mind that he could not imagine where and how M. Lecoq had obtained them. Finally he humbly said: "You have then been occupying yourself with this case, my chief?"

"Probably I have; but I am not infallible, and may have overlooked some important evidence. Take a seat, and tell me all you know."

M. Lecoq was not the man to be hoodwinked, so Fanferlot told the exact truth, a rare thing for him to do. However, as he reached the end of his statement, a feeling of mortified vanity prevented his telling how he had been fooled by Nina and the stout man. Unfortunately for poor Fanferlot, M. Lecoq was always fully informed on every subject in which he interested himself. "It seems to me, Master Squirrel," said he, "that you have forgotten something. How far did you follow the empty cab?"

Fanferlot blushed, and hung his head like a guilty schoolboy. "Oh, my chief!" he cried, "and you know all about that too! How could you have—" But a sudden idea flashed across his mind, he stopped short, bounded off his chair, and exclaimed: "Oh! I know now: you were the stout gentleman with the red whiskers."

His amazement gave so singular an expression to his face that M. Lecoq could not restrain a smile. "Then it was you!" continued the bewildered detective; "you were the stout gentleman at whom I stared, so as to impress his appearance upon my mind, and I never recognized you! You would make a superb actor, my chief, if you would go on the stage; but I was disguised too—very well disguised."

"Very poorly disguised: it is only just to you that I should let you know what a failure it was, Fanferlot. Do you think that a huge beard and a blouse are a sufficient transformation? The eye is the thing to be changed—the eye! The art lies in being able to change the eye. That is the secret." This theory of disguise explained why the lynx-eyed Lecoq never appeared at the Prefecture of Police without his gold spectacles.

"Then, my chief," said Fanferlot, clinging to his idea, "you have been more successful than Madame Alexandre; you have made the little girl confess? You know why she leaves the

Grand Archangel, why she does not wait for M. de Lagors, and why she has bought herself some cotton dresses?"

"She is following my advice."

"That being the case," said the detective dejectedly, "there is nothing left for me to do but to acknowledge myself an ass."

"No, Squirrel," said M. Lecoq, kindly. "You are not an ass. You merely did wrong in undertaking a task beyond your capacity. Have you progressed one step since you started in this affair? No. That shows that, although you are incomparable as a lieutenant, you do not possess the qualities of a general. I am going to present you with an aphorism; remember it, and let it be your guide in the future: *A man can shine in the second rank who would be totally eclipsed in the first.*"

Never had Fanferlot seen his chief so talkative and good-natured. Finding his deceit discovered, he had expected to be overwhelmed with a storm of anger; whereas he had escaped with a little shower that had cooled his brain. Lecoq's anger disappeared like one of those heavy clouds which threaten in the horizon for a moment, and then are suddenly swept away by a gust of wind.

But this unexpected affability made Fanferlot feel uneasy. He was afraid that something might be concealed beneath it. "Do you know who the thief is, my chief?" he inquired.

"I know no more than you do, Fanferlot; and you seem to have made up your mind, whereas I am still undecided. You declare the cashier to be innocent, and the banker guilty. I don't know whether you are right or wrong. I follow after you, and have got no further than the preliminaries of my investigation. I am certain of but one thing, and that is, the scratch on the safe-door. That scratch is my starting-point."

As he spoke, M. Lecoq took from his desk an immense sheet of paper which he unrolled. On this paper was photographed the door of M. Fauvel's safe. Every detail was rendered perfectly. There were the five movable buttons with the engraved letters, and the narrow, projecting brass lock. The scratch was indicated with great exactness.

"Now," said M. Lecoq, "here is our scratch. It runs from top to bottom, starting diagonally, from the keyhole, and proceeding from left to right; that is to say, it terminates on the side next to the private staircase leading to the banker's apartments. Although very deep at the keyhole, it ends in a scarcely perceptible mark."

"Yes, my chief, I see all that."

"Naturally you thought that this scratch was made by the person who took the money. Let us see if you were right. I have here a little iron box, painted green like M. Fauvel's safe; here it is. Take a key, and try to scratch it."

"The deuce take it!" said Fanferlot after several attempts, "this paint is awfully hard to move!"

"Very hard, my friend, and yet that on the safe is harder still, and more solid. So you see the scratch you discovered could not have been made by the trembling hand of a thief letting the key slip."

"Sapristi!" exclaimed Fanferlot amazed; "I never should have thought of that. It certainly required great force to make the deep scratch on the safe."

"Yes, but how was that force applied? I have been racking my brain for three days, and it was only yesterday that I came to a conclusion. Let us examine if my conjectures present enough chances of probability to establish a starting-point."

M. Lecoq put the photograph aside, and, walking to the door communicating with his bedroom, took the key from the lock, and, holding it in his hands, said: "Come here, Fanferlot, and stand by my side, there; very well. Now suppose that I want to open this door, and that you don't wish me to open it; when you see me about to insert the key, what would be your first impulse?"

"To put my hands on your arm, and draw it toward me so as to prevent your introducing the key."

"Precisely so. Now let us try it; go on." Fanferlot obeyed; and the key held by M. Lecoq, pulled aside from the lock, slipped along the door, and traced upon it, from above to below a diagonal scratch, the exact reproduction of the one in the photograph.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Fanferlot in three different tones of admiration, as he stood gazing in a reverie at the door.

"Do you begin to understand?" asked M. Lecoq.

"Understand, my chief? Why, a child could understand it now. Ah, what a man you are! I see the scene as if I had been there. Two persons were present at the robbery; one wished to take the money, the other wished to prevent its being taken. That is clear, that is certain."

Accustomed to triumphs of this sort, M. Lecoq was much amused at Fanferlot's enthusiasm. "There you go off, half-

primed again," he said good-humoredly; "you regard as certain proof a circumstance which may be accidental, and at the most only probable."

"No, my chief; no! a man like you could not be mistaken; doubt is no longer possible."

"That being the case, what deductions would you draw from our discovery?"

"In the first place, it proves that I am correct in thinking the cashier innocent."

"How so?"

"Because, being at perfect liberty to open the safe whenever he wished to do so, it is not likely that he would have had a witness present when he intended to commit the theft."

"Well reasoned, Fanferlot. But on this supposition the banker would be equally innocent; reflect a little."

Fanferlot reflected, and all his confidence vanished. "You are right," he said in a despairing tone. "What can be done now?"

"Look for the third rogue, or rather the real rogue, the one who opened the safe and stole the notes, and who is still at large, while others are suspected."

"Impossible, my chief, impossible! Don't you know that M. Fauvel and his cashier had keys, and they only? And they always kept these keys in their possession."

"On the evening of the robbery the banker left his key in his escritoire."

"Yes; but the key alone was not sufficient to open the safe; it was necessary that the word also should be known."

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "What was the word?" he asked.

"Gipsy."

"Which is the name of the cashier's mistress. Now keep your eyes open. The day you find a man sufficiently intimate with Prosper to be aware of all the circumstances connected with this name, and who is at the same time on such a footing with the Fauvel family as would give him the privilege of entering M. Fauvel's chamber, then, and not until then, will you discover the guilty party. On that day the problem will be solved."

Self-sufficient and vain, like all famous men, M. Lecoq had never had a pupil, and never wished to have one. He worked alone, because he hated assistants, wishing to share neither the

pleasures of success nor the pain of defeat. Thus Fanferlot, who knew his chief's character, was astonished to hear him giving advice who heretofore had only given orders. He was so puzzled that, in spite of his preoccupation, he could not help betraying his surprise. "My chief," he ventured to say, "you seem to take a great interest in this affair, you have so deeply studied it."

M. Lecoq started nervously, and replied, frowning: "You are too curious, Master Squirrel; be careful that you do not go too far. Do you understand?"

Fanferlot began to apologize.

"That will do," interrupted M. Lecoq. "If I choose to lend you a helping hand, it is because it suits my fancy to do so. It pleases me to be the head, and to let you be the hand. Unassisted, with your preconceived ideas, you never would have found the culprit; if we two together don't find him, my name is not Lecoq."

"We shall certainly succeed, as you interest yourself in the case."

"Yes, I am interested in it, and during the last four days I have discovered many important facts. But listen to me. I have reasons for not appearing in this affair. No matter what happens, I forbid you mentioning my name. If we succeed, all the success must be attributed to you. And, above all, don't try to find out what I choose to keep from you. Be satisfied with what explanations I give you. Now, be careful."

These conditions seemed to suit Fanferlot perfectly. "I will obey your instructions and be discreet," he replied.

"I shall rely upon you," continued M. Lecoq. "Now, to begin, you must carry this photograph to the investigating magistrate. I know M. Patrigent is much perplexed about the case. Explain to him as if it were your own discovery what I have just shown you; repeat for his benefit the experiment we have performed, and I am convinced that this evidence will determine him to release the cashier. Prosper must be at liberty before I can commence my operations."

"Of course, my chief; but must I let him know that I suspect any one besides the banker or cashier?"

"Certainly. The authorities must not be kept in ignorance of your intention of following up this affair. M. Patrigent will tell you to watch Prosper; you will reply that you will not lose sight of him. I myself will answer for his being in safe keeping."

"Suppose he asks me about Nina Gipsy?"

M. Lecoq hesitated for a moment. "Tell him," he finally said, "that you persuaded her, in the interest of Prosper, to live in a house where she can watch some one whom you suspect."

Fanferlot rolled up the photograph and joyously seized hold of his hat, intending to depart, when M. Lecoq checked him by waving his hand, and said: "I have not finished yet. Do you know how to drive a carriage and manage horses?"

"How can you ask such a question as this, my chief, of a man who used to be a rider in the Bouthor Circus?"

"Very good. As soon as the magistrate dismisses you, return home immediately, obtain for yourself a wig and the complete dress of a valet; and, when you are ready, take this letter to the agency for servants at the corner of the Passage Delorme."

"But, my chief—"

"There must be no but, my friend; the agent will send you to M. de Clameran, who is wanting a valet, his man having left him yesterday."

"Excuse me, if I venture to suggest that I think you are laboring under a wrong impression. This De Clameran is not the cashier's friend."

"Why do you always interrupt me?" said M. Lecoq imperiously. "Do what I tell you, and don't disturb your mind about the rest. I know that De Clameran is not a friend of Prosper's; but he is the friend and protector of Raoul de Lagors. Why so? Whence the intimacy of these two men of such different ages? That is what I must find out. I must also find out who this ironmaster is who spends all his time in Paris, and never goes to look after his forges. An individual who takes it into his head to live at the Hotel du Louvre, in the midst of a constantly changing crowd, is a fellow difficult to watch. Through you I will keep an eye upon him. He has a carriage, which you will have to drive; you will soon be able to give me an account of his manner of life, and of the sort of people with whom he associates."

"You shall be obeyed, my chief."

"Another thing. M. de Clameran is irritable and suspicious. You will be presented to him under the name of Joseph Dubois. He will ask for certificates of your good character. Here are three, which state that you have lived with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and the Count de Commarin, and that you have just

left the Baron de Wortschen, who went to Germany the other day. Now keep your eyes open; be careful of your get-up and manners. Be polite, but not excessively so. And, above all things, don't be too honest: it might arouse suspicion."

"I understand, my chief. Where shall I report to you?"

"I will see you daily. Until I tell you differently, don't put foot in this house; you might be followed. If anything important should happen, send a telegram to your wife, and she will inform me. Go, and be prudent."

The door closed on Fanferlot as M. Lecoq passed into his bedroom. In the twinkling of an eye the latter divested himself of the appearance of chief detective. He took off his stiff cravat and gold spectacles and removed the close wig from his thick black hair. The official Lecoq had disappeared, leaving in his place the genuine Lecoq whom nobody knew—a good-looking young man, with a bold, determined manner, and brilliant, piercing eyes. But he only remained himself for an instant. Seated before a dressing-table covered with more cosmetics, paints, perfumes, false hair, and other shams than are to be found on the toilet-tables of our modern belles, he began to undo the work of nature and to make himself a new face. He worked slowly, handling his brushes with great care. But in an hour he had accomplished one of his daily masterpieces. When he had finished, he was no longer Lecoq: he was the stout gentleman with red whiskers whom Fanferlot had failed to recognize.

"Well," he said, casting a last look in the mirror, "I have forgotten nothing: I have left nothing to chance. All my plans are fixed; and I shall make some progress to-day, provided the Squirrel does not waste time."

But Fanferlot was too happy to waste even a minute. He did not run, he flew, toward the Palais de Justice. At last he was able to convince some one that he, Fanferlot, was a man of wonderful perspicacity. As to acknowledging that he was about to obtain a triumph with the ideas of another man, he never thought of such a thing. It is generally in perfect good faith that the jackdaw struts about in the peacock's feathers.

Fanferlot's hopes were not deceived. If the magistrate was not absolutely convinced, he admired the ingenuity and shrewdness of the whole proceeding. "This decides me," he said, as he dismissed Fanferlot. "I will draw up a favorable report to-day; and it is highly probable that the accused will be

released to-morrow." He began at once to write out one of those terrible decisions of "Not proven," which restores liberty, but not honor, to the accused man; which says that he is not guilty, but does not say that he is innocent.

"Whereas sufficient proofs are wanting against the accused, Prosper Bertomy, in pursuance of Article 128 of the Criminal Code, we hereby declare that no grounds at present exist for prosecuting the aforesaid prisoner; and we order that he be released from the prison where he is confined, and set at liberty by the jailer," etc.

"Well," said he to the clerk, "here we have another of those crimes which justice can not clear up. The mystery remains to be solved. There is another file to be stowed away among the police records." And with his own hand he wrote on the cover of the bundle of papers relating to Prosper's case its number of rotation: *File Number 113.*

VII

PROSPER had been languishing in his cell for nine days, when one Thursday morning the jailer came to apprise him of the magistrate's decision. He was conducted before the officer who had searched him when he was arrested: and his watch, penknife, and several small articles of jewelry were restored to him; then he was told to sign a large sheet of paper, which he did.

He was next led across a dark passage, and almost pushed through a door, which was abruptly shut upon him. He found himself on the quay: he was alone; he was free.

Free! Justice had confessed her inability to convict him of the crime of which he was accused. Free! He could walk about, he could breathe the fresh air; but every door would be closed against him. Only acquittal after due trial would restore him to his former position among men. A decision of "Not proven" had left him exposed to continual suspicion.

The torments inflicted by public opinion are more fearful than those endured in a prison cell. At the moment of his restora-

tion to liberty, Prosper suffered so cruelly from the horror of his situation that he could not repress a cry of rage and despair. "I am innocent! God knows I am innocent!" he cried out. But of what use was his anger? Two strangers, who were passing, stopped to look at him, and said pityingly: "The poor fellow is crazy."

The Seine was at his feet. A thought of suicide crossed his mind. "No," he said, "no! I have not even the right to kill myself. No: I will not die until I have proved my innocence!"

Often, day and night, had Prosper repeated these words, as he walked his cell. With a heart filled with a bitter, determined thirst for vengeance, which gives a man the force and patience to destroy or wear out all obstacles in his way, he would say: "Oh! why am I not at liberty? I am helpless, caged up; but let me once be free!" Now he was free; and for the first time he saw the difficulties of the task before him. For each crime, justice requires a criminal; he could not establish his own innocence without producing the guilty individual; how was he to find the thief and hand him over to the law?

Despondent, but not discouraged, Prosper turned in the direction of his apartments. He was beset by a thousand anxieties. What had taken place during the nine days that he had been cut off from all intercourse with his friends? No news of them had reached him. He had heard no more of what was going on in the outside world than if his secret cell had been a tomb. He walked slowly along the streets, with his eyes cast down, dreading to meet some familiar face. He, who had always been so haughty, would now be pointed at with the finger of scorn. He would be greeted with cold looks and averted faces. Men would refuse to shake hands with him. Still, if he could count on only one true friend! Yes, only one. But what friend would believe him when his father, who should have been the last to suspect him, had refused to believe him?

In the midst of his sufferings, when he felt almost overwhelmed by the sense of his wretched, lonely condition, Prosper thought of Nina Gipsy. He had never loved the poor girl: indeed, at times he almost hated her; but now he felt a longing to see her, because he knew that she loved him, and that nothing would make her think him guilty; because, too, woman remains true and firm in her belief, and is always faithful in the hour of adversity, although she sometimes fails in prosperity.

On reaching his house in the Rue Chaptal, Prosper hesitated

at the moment he was about to cross the threshold. He suffered from the timidity which an honest man always feels when he knows he is regarded with suspicion. He dreaded meeting any one whom he knew; still he could not remain in the street, so he entered. When the concierge saw him, he uttered an exclamation of glad surprise, and said: "Ah, here you are at last, sir. I told every one you would come out as white as snow; and, when I read in the papers that you were arrested for robbery, I said: 'My third-floor lodger a thief! Never would I believe such a thing, never!'"

The congratulations of this ignorant man were sincere, and came from pure kindness of heart; but they impressed Prosper painfully and he cut them short by abruptly exclaiming: "Madame, of course, has left; can you tell me where she has gone?"

"Dear me, no, I can not. The day of your arrest, she sent for a cab and left with her trunks, and no one has seen or heard of her since."

This was another blow to the unhappy cashier. "And where are my servants?"

"Gone, sir. Your father paid them their wages and discharged them."

"I suppose, then, you have my key?"

"No, sir; when your father left here this morning at eight o'clock, he told me that a friend of his would take charge of your rooms until you returned. Of course you know who he is—a stout gentleman with red whiskers."

Prosper was astounded. What could be the meaning of one of his father's friends occupying his rooms? He did not, however, betray his surprise, but quietly said: "Yes, I know who it is."

He quickly ran up the stairs, and knocked at his door, which was at once opened by his father's friend. He had been accurately described by the concierge. A stout man, with a red face, full lips, sharp eyes, and of rather coarse manners, stood bowing to Prosper, who had never seen him before. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said he.

He seemed to be perfectly at home. On the table lay a book, which he had taken from the bookcase; and he appeared ready to do the honors of the place.

"I must say, sir," began Prosper.

"That you are surprised to find me here? So I suppose. Your father intended introducing me to you; but he was com-

pelled to return to Beaucaire this morning; and let me add that he departed thoroughly convinced, as I myself am, that you never took a sou from M. Fauvel."

At this unexpected good news, Prosper's face lit up with pleasure.

"Here is a letter from your father, which I hope will serve as an introduction between us."

Prosper opened the letter; and as he read his eyes grew brighter, and a slight color returned to his pale face. When he had finished he held out his hand to the stout gentleman, and said: "My father tells me, sir, that you are his best friend; he advises me to have absolute confidence in you, and to follow your advice."

"Exactly. This morning your father said to me: 'Verduret' —that is my name—'Verduret, my son is in great trouble, and must be helped out of it.' I replied: 'I am both ready and willing,' and here I am to assist you. Now the ice is broken, is it not? Then let us go to work at once. What do you intend doing?"

This question revived Prosper's slumbering rage. His eyes flashed. "What do I intend doing?" said he angrily. "What should I do but seek the villain who has ruined me?"

"So I supposed; but have you any means of success?"

"None; yet I shall succeed, because, when a man devotes his whole life to the accomplishment of an object, he is certain to achieve it."

"Well said, M. Prosper; and, to be frank, I fully expected that this would be your purpose. I have therefore already begun to think and act for you. I have a plan. In the first place, you will sell this furniture, and disappear from the neighborhood."

"Disappear!" cried Prosper indignantly; "disappear! Why, sir! do you not see that such a step would be a confession of guilt, would authorize the world to say that I am hiding so as to enjoy undisturbed the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

"Well, what then?" said the man with the red whiskers; "did you not say just now that the sacrifice of your life is made? The expert swimmer thrown into the river, after being robbed, is careful not to rise to the surface immediately: on the contrary, he plunges beneath, and remains there as long as his breath holds out. He comes up again at a great distance off,

and lands out of sight; then, when he is supposed to be dead, he suddenly reappears and has his revenge. You have an enemy? Some petty imprudence will betray him. But, while he sees you standing by on the watch, he will be on his guard."

It was with a sort of amazed submission that Prosper listened to this man, who, though a friend of his father, was an utter stranger to himself. He submitted unconsciously to the ascendency of a nature so much more energetic and forcible than his own. In his helpless condition he was grateful for friendly assistance, and said: "I will follow your advice, sir."

"I was sure you would, my dear fellow. Let us reflect upon the course you ought to pursue. And remember that you will need every franc of the proceeds of the sale. Have you any ready money? no, but you must have some. Knowing that you would need this at once, I have already spoken to an upholsterer; and he will give you twelve thousand francs for everything minus the pictures."

The cashier could not refrain from shrugging his shoulders, which M. Verduret observed. "Well," said he, "it is rather hard, I admit, but it is a necessity. Now listen: you are the invalid, and I am the doctor charged to cure you; if I cut to the quick, you will have to endure it. It is the only way to save you."

"Cut away then," answered Prosper.

"Well, we will make haste, for time presses. You have a friend, M. de Lagors?"

"Raoul? Yes, he is an intimate friend of mine."

"Now tell me, who is this fellow?"

The term "fellow" seemed to offend Prosper. "M. de Lagors," he said haughtily, "is M. Fauvel's nephew; he is a wealthy young man, handsome, intelligent, cultivated, and the best friend I have."

"Hum!" said M. Verduret, "I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of one adorned by so many charming qualities. I must let you know that I wrote him a note in your name asking him to come here, and he sent word that he would come."

"What! do you suppose—"

"Oh, I suppose nothing! Only I must see this young man. Also I have arranged and will submit to you a little plan of conversation—" A ring at the outer door interrupted M. Verduret. "The deuce!" exclaimed he; "adieu to my plan; here he is! Where can I hide so as to both hear and see?"

"There, in my bedroom; leave the door open and the curtain down."

A second ring was heard. "Now remember, Prosper," said M. Verduret in a warning tone, "not one word to this man about your plans, or about me. Pretend to be discouraged, helpless, and undecided what to do." And he disappeared behind the curtain as Prosper ran to open the door.

Prosper's portrait of M. de Lagors was no exaggerated one. Such an open and handsome countenance and manly figure could belong only to a noble character. Although Raoul said that he was twenty-four, he appeared to be not more than twenty. He had a fine figure, well knit and supple; an abundance of light chestnut-colored hair, curled over his intelligent-looking forehead, and his large blue eyes, which beamed with candor. His first impulse was to throw himself into Prosper's arms. "My poor, dear friend!" he said, "my poor Prosper!"

But beneath these affectionate demonstrations there was a certain constraint, which, if it escaped the perception of the cashier, was noticed by M. Verduret. "Your letter, my dear Prosper," said Raoul, "made me almost ill, I was so frightened by it. I asked myself if you could have lost your mind. Then I put aside everything, to hasten to your assistance; and here I am."

Prosper did not seem to hear him; his thoughts were occupied with the letter which he had not written. What were its contents? Who was this stranger whose assistance he had accepted?

"You must not feel discouraged," continued M. de Lagors; "you are young enough to commence life anew. Your friends are still left to you. I have come to say to you: 'Rely upon me; I am rich, half of my fortune is at your disposal."

This generous offer, made at a moment like this with such frank simplicity, deeply touched Prosper. "Thanks, Raoul," he said with emotion, "thank you! But unfortunately all the money in the world would be of no use now."

"Why so? What, then, are you going to do? Do you propose to remain in Paris?"

"I know not, Raoul. I have formed no plans yet. My mind is too confused for me to think."

"I will tell you what to do," resumed Raoul quickly; "you must start afresh; until this mysterious robbery is explained you must keep away from Paris. Excuse my frankness, but it will never do for you to remain here."

"And suppose it never should be explained?"

"Only the more reason for your remaining in oblivion. I have been talking about you to De Clameran. 'If I were in Prosper's place,' he said, 'I would turn everything into money, and embark for America; there I would make a fortune, and return to crush with my millions those who have suspected me."

This advice offended Prosper's pride, but he interposed no kind of objection. He was recalling to mind what his unknown visitor had said to him. "I will think it over," he finally observed. "I will see. I should like to know what M. Fauvel says."

"My uncle? I suppose you know that I have declined the offer he made me to enter his banking-house, and we have almost quarreled. I have not set foot in his house for over a month; but I hear of him occasionally."

"Through whom?"

"Through your friend Cavaillon. My uncle, they say, is more distressed by this affair than you are. He does not attend to his business, and seems as though he had just recovered from some serious illness."

"And Madame Fauvel, and—" Prosper hesitated—"and Mademoiselle Madeleine, how are they?"

"Oh," said Raoul lightly, "my aunt is as pious as ever; she has mass said for the benefit of the sinner. As to my handsome, icy cousin, she can not bring herself down to common matters, because she is entirely absorbed in preparing for the fancy ball to be given the day after to-morrow by MM. Jandidier. She has discovered, so one of her friends told me, a wonderful dressmaker, a stranger who has suddenly appeared from no one knows where, and who is making for her a costume of one of Catherine de Médicis's maids of honor. I hear it is to be a marvel of beauty."

Excessive suffering brings with it a kind of dull insensibility and stupor; but this last remark of M. de Lagors's touched Prosper to the quick, and he murmured faintly: "Madeleine! Oh, Madeleine!"

M. de Lagors, pretending not to have heard him, rose from his chair, and said: "I must leave you now, my dear Prosper; on Saturday I shall see these ladies at the ball, and bring you news of them. Now, take courage, and remember that, whatever happens, you have a friend in me."

Raoul shook Prosper by the hand and departed, leaving the

latter standing immovable and overcome by disappointment. He was aroused from his gloomy reverie by hearing the red-whiskered man say in a bantering tone: "So that is one of your friends?"

"Yes," said Prosper with bitterness. "Yet you heard him offer me half of his fortune?"

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders with an air of compassion. "That was very stingy on his part," said he; "why did he not offer the whole? Offers cost nothing; although I have no doubt that this sweet youth would cheerfully give ten thousand francs to put the ocean between you and him."

"What reason, sir, would he have for doing this?"

"Who knows? Perhaps for the same reason that he told you he had not set foot in his uncle's house for a month."

"But that is the truth, I am sure of it."

"Naturally," said M. Verduret with a provoking smile. "But," continued he with a serious air, "we have devoted enough time to this Adonis, whose measure I have taken. Now, be good enough to change your dress, and we will go and call on M. Fauvel."

This proposal aroused Prosper's anger. "Never!" he exclaimed excitedly; "no, never will I voluntarily set eyes on that wretch!"

This resistance did not surprise M. Verduret. "I can understand your feelings toward him," said he; "but at the same time I hope you will change your mind. For the same reason that I wished to see M. de Lagors I desire to see M. Fauvel; it is necessary, you understand. Are you so very weak that you can not constrain yourself for five minutes? I shall introduce myself as one of your relatives, and you need not open your lips."

"If it is positively necessary," said Prosper, "if—"

"It is necessary; so come on. You must have confidence, and put on a brave face. Hurry and make yourself trim; it is getting late, and I am hungry. We will lunch on our way there."

Prosper had hardly passed into his bedroom when the bell rang again. M. Verduret opened the door. It was the concierge, who handed him a bulky letter, and said: "This letter was left this morning for M. Bertomy; I was so flustered when he came that I forgot to hand it to him. It is a very odd-looking letter; is it not, sir?"

It was indeed a most peculiar missive. The address was not written, but formed of printed letters, carefully cut from a book, and pasted on the envelope.

"Oh, ho! what is this!" cried M. Verduret; then turning toward the man he said: "Wait a moment." He went into the next room, and closed the door behind him. There he found Prosper, anxious to know what was going on. "Here is a letter for you," observed M. Verduret.

Prosper at once tore open the envelope. Some bank-notes dropped out; he counted them; there were ten. The cashier turned very red. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"We will read the letter and find out," replied Verduret.

The letter, like the address, was composed of printed words cut out and pasted on a sheet of paper. It was short but explicit:

"My dear Prosper—A friend, who knows the horror of your situation, sends you this succor. There is one heart, be assured, that shares your sufferings. Go away—leave France. You are young; the future is before you. Go, and may this money bring you happiness!"

As M. Verduret read the note, Prosper's rage increased. He was angry and perplexed, for he could not explain the rapidly succeeding events which were so calculated to mystify his already confused brain. "Everybody wishes me to go away," he cried; "there is evidently a conspiracy against me."

M. Verduret smiled with satisfaction. "At last you begin to open your eyes, you begin to understand. Yes, there are people who hate you because of the wrong they have done you; there are people to whom your presence in Paris is a constant danger, and who will not feel safe till they are rid of you."

"But who are these people? Tell me, who dares send this money?"

"If I knew, my dear Prosper, my task would be at an end, for then I should know who committed the robbery. But we will continue our researches. I have finally procured evidence which will sooner or later become convincing proof. I have heretofore only made deductions more or less probable; I now possess knowledge which proves that I was not mistaken. I walked in darkness: now I have a light to guide me."

As Prosper listened to M. Verduret's reassuring words, he felt hope rising in his breast.

"Now," said M. Verduret, "we must take advantage of this evidence, gained by the imprudence of our enemies, without delay. We will begin with the concierge."

He opened the door, and called out: "I say, my good man, step here a moment."

The concierge entered, looking very much surprised at the authority exercised over his lodger by this stranger.

"Who gave you this letter?" asked M. Verduret.

"A messenger, who said he was paid for bringing it."

"Do you know him?"

"I know him well; he is the commissionaire whose post is at the corner of the Rue Pigalle."

"Go and bring him here."

After the concierge had gone, M. Verduret drew his diary from his pocket and compared a page of it with the notes which he had spread over the table. "These notes were not sent by the thief," he said, after an attentive examination of them.

"Do you think so?"

"I am confident of it; that is, unless he is endowed with extraordinary penetration and forethought. One thing is certain: these ten thousand francs are not part of the three hundred and fifty thousand which were stolen from the safe."

"Yet," said Prosper, who could not account for this certainty on the part of his protector, "yet—"

"There is no yet about it: I have the numbers of all the stolen notes."

"What! When even I did not know them myself?"

"But the bank did, fortunately. When we undertake an affair we must anticipate everything, and forget nothing. It is a poor excuse for a man to say, 'I did not think of it,' when he commits some oversight. I thought of the bank."

If in the beginning Prosper had felt some repugnance about confiding in his father's friend, the feeling had now disappeared. He understood that alone, scarcely master of himself, governed only by the inspirations of inexperience, he would never have had the patient perspicacity of this singular man.

Verduret continued, talking to himself, as if he had absolutely forgotten Prosper's presence: "Then, as this missive did not come from the thief, it can only come from the other person, who was near the safe at the time of the robbery, but could not prevent it, and now feels remorse. The probability of two persons assisting at the robbery, a probability suggested by the

scratch, is now converted into a certainty. *Ergo*, I was right." Prosper, listening attentively, tried hard to comprehend this monologue, which he dared not interrupt.

"Let us seek," the stout man went on to say, "this second person, whose conscience pricks him, and yet who dares not reveal anything." Here he read the letter over several times, scanning the sentences, and weighing every word. "Evidently this letter was composed by a woman," he finally said. "Never would a man doing another man a service, and sending him money, use the word 'succor.' A man would have said loan, money, or some other equivalent, but succor, never. No one but a woman, ignorant of masculine susceptibilities, would have naturally made use of this word to express the idea it represents. As to the sentence, 'There is one heart,' and so on, it could only have been written by a woman."

"You are mistaken, sir, I think," said Prosper; "no woman is mixed up in this affair."

M. Verduret paid no attention to this interruption; perhaps he did not hear it, perhaps he did not care to argue the matter. "Now, let us see if we can discover whence the printed words were taken to compose this letter."

He went to the window, and began to study the pasted words with all the scrupulous attention which an antiquary would devote to an old, half-effaced manuscript. "Small type," he said, "very slender and clear; the paper is thin and glossy. Consequently, these words have not been cut from a newspaper, magazine, or even a novel. Yet I have seen type like this—I recognize it, I am sure Didot often uses it, so does Mame of Tours."

He suddenly stopped, his mouth open, and his eyes fixed, appealing as though anxiously to his memory. Suddenly he struck his forehead exultingly. "Now I have it!" he cried; "now I have it! Why did I not see it at once? These words have all been cut from a prayer-book. We will look, at least, and then we shall be certain."

He moistened one of the words pasted on the paper with his tongue, and when it was sufficiently softened, he detached it with a pin. On the other side of this word was the Latin word, *Deus*.

"Ah, ah!" he exclaimed with a little laugh of satisfaction, "I knew it. Old Tabaret would be pleased to see this. But what has become of the mutilated prayer-book? Can it have

been burned? No, because a heavy-bound book is not easily burned. It has been thrown aside in some corner."

He was here interrupted by the concierge, who returned with the commissionaire from the Rue Pigalle.

"Ah, here you are," said M. Verduret, encouragingly. Then he showed him the envelope of the letter, and asked: "Do you remember bringing this letter here this morning?"

"Perfectly, sir. I took particular notice of the direction; we don't often see anything like it."

"Who told you to bring it?—a gentleman or a lady?"

"Neither, sir, it was a commissionaire."

This reply made the concierge laugh very much, but not a muscle of M. Verduret's face moved.

"A commissionaire? Well, do you know this colleague of yours?"

"I never saw him before."

"What was he like?"

"He was neither tall nor short; he wore a green velvet jacket and his badge."

"Your description is so vague that it would suit every commissionaire in the city; but did your colleague tell you who sent the letter?"

"No, sir. He simply put ten sous in my hand, and said: 'Here, carry this to No. 39 Rue Chaptal; a cabman on the boulevard handed it to me.' Ten sous! I warrant you he made more than that by it."

This answer seemed to disconcert M. Verduret. The taking of so many precautions to send this letter disturbed him and upset all his plans.

"Do you think you would recognize the commissionaire again?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, if I saw him."

"How much do you gain a day as a commissionaire?"

"I can't exactly tell; but mine is a good corner, and I am busy going errands nearly all day. I suppose I make from eight to ten francs."

"Very well: I will give you ten francs a day if you will walk about the streets and look for the commissionaire who gave you this letter. Every evening, at eight o'clock, come to the Grand Archangel, on the Quai Saint Michel, to give me a report of your search and receive your pay. Ask for M. Verduret. If you find the man I will give you fifty francs. Do you agree?"

"I should rather think I do."

"Then don't lose a minute. Start off!"

Although ignorant of M. Verduret's plans, Prosper began to comprehend the sense of his investigations. His fate depended upon their success, and yet he almost forgot this fact in his admiration of this singular man; for his energy, his bantering coolness when he wished to discover anything, the certainty of his deductions, the fertility of his expedients, and the rapidity of his movements, were astonishing.

"Do you still think, sir," said Prosper when the man had left the room, "you see a woman's hand in this affair?"

"More than ever; and a pious woman too, who has at least two prayer-books, since she could cut up one to write to you."

"And you hope to find the mutilated book?"

"I do, thanks to the opportunity I have of making an immediate search; which I will set about at once."

Saying this, he sat down, and rapidly scratched off a few lines on a slip of paper, which he folded up, and put in his waistcoat pocket. "Are you ready to go to M. Fauvel's?" he then asked. "Yes? Come on, then; we have certainly earned our lunch to-day."

VIII

WHEN Raoul de Lagors spoke of M. Fauvel's extraordinary dejection, he had been guilty of no exaggeration. Since the fatal day when, upon his denunciation, his cashier had been arrested, the banker, this active, energetic man of business, had been a prey to the most gloomy melancholy, and ceased to take any interest in the affairs of his banking-house.

He, who had always been so devoted to his family, never came near them except at meals, when as soon as he had swallowed a few mouthfuls, he would hastily leave the room. Shut up in his study, he would deny himself to visitors. His anxious countenance, his indifference to everybody and everything, his constant reveries and fits of abstraction, betrayed the presence of some fixed idea or of some hidden sorrow.

The day of Prosper's release, about three o'clock, M. Fauvel was, as usual, seated in his study, with his elbows resting on the table, and his face buried in his hands, when his valet abruptly entered, and, with a frightened look, said:

"M. Bertomy, the former cashier, is here, sir, with one of his relatives; he says he must see you."

At these words the banker jumped up as if he had been shot at. "Prosper!" he cried in a voice choked by anger, "what! does he dare—" Then remembering that he ought to control himself before his servant, he waited a few moments, and said, in a tone of forced calmness: "Ask the gentlemen to walk in."

If M. Verduret had counted upon witnessing a strange and affecting scene, he was not disappointed. Nothing could be more terrible than the attitude of these two men as they stood confronting each other. The banker's face was almost purple with suppressed anger, and he looked as if he were about to be seized with a fit of apoplexy. Prosper was pale and motionless as a corpse. Silent and immovable, they stood glaring at each other with mortal hatred.

M. Verduret watched these two enemies with the indifference and coolness of a philosopher, who, in the most violent outbursts of human passion, merely see subjects for meditation and study. Finally, the silence becoming more and more threatening, he decided to break it by speaking to the banker:

"I suppose you know, sir," said he, "that my young relative has just been released from prison."

"Yes," replied M. Fauvel, making an effort to control himself, "yes, for want of sufficient proof."

"Exactly so, sir; and this want of proof, as stated in the decision of 'Not proven,' ruins the prospects of my relative, and compels him to leave here at once for America."

On hearing this statement, M. Fauvel's features relaxed as if he had been relieved of some fearful agony. "Ah, he is going away," he kept repeating, "he is going abroad." There was no mistaking the insulting intonation of the words, "going away!"

M. Verduret took no notice of M. Fauvel's manner. "It appears to me," he continued in an easy tone, "that Prosper's determination is a wise one. I merely wished him, before leaving Paris, to come and pay his respects to his former chief."

The banker smiled bitterly. "M. Bertomy might have spared us both this painful meeting. I have nothing to say to him, and of course he can have nothing to tell me."

This was a formal dismissal; and M. Verduret, understanding it thus, bowed to M. Fauvel and left the room, accompanied by Prosper, who had not opened his lips.

They had reached the street before Prosper recovered the use of his tongue. "I hope you are satisfied, sir," said he in a gloomy tone. "You exacted this painful step, and I could but acquiesce. Have I gained anything by adding this humiliation to the others which I have had to suffer?"

"You have not, but I have," replied M. Verduret. "I could find no way of gaining access to M. Fauvel save through you; and now I have found out what I wanted to know. I am convinced that M. Fauvel had nothing to do with the robbery."

"But you know, sir, innocence can be feigned," objected Prosper.

"Certainly, but not to this extent. And this is not all. I wished to find out if M. Fauvel would be accessible to certain suspicions. I can now confidently reply 'yes.'"

Prosper and his companion had stopped to talk more at their ease near the corner of Rue Lafitte, in the middle of a large space which had lately been cleared by pulling down an old house. M. Verduret seemed to be anxious, and was constantly looking around as if he expected some one. He soon uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. At the other end of the vacant space he saw Cavaillon, who was bareheaded and running.

The latter was so excited that he did not even stop to shake hands with Prosper, but darted up to M. Verduret, and said: "They have gone, sir!"

"How long since?"

"They went about a quarter of an hour ago."

"The deuce they did! Then we have not an instant to lose."

He handed Cavaillon the note he had written some hours before at Prosper's house.

"Here, pass this on, and then return at once to your desk; you might be missed. It was very imprudent of you to come out without your hat."

Cavaillon ran off as quickly as he had come. Prosper was astounded. "What!" he exclaimed. "You know Cavaillon?"

"So it seems," answered M. Verduret with a smile. "But we have no time to talk; come on, we must hurry!"

"Where are we going now?"

"You will soon know; let us walk fast!" And he set the example by striding rapidly toward the Rue Lafayette. As

they went along he continued talking more to himself than to Prosper.

"Ah," said he, "it is not by putting both feet in one shoe that one wins a race. The trace once found, we should never rest an instant. When the savage discovers the footprints of an enemy he follows it persistently, knowing that falling rain or a gust of wind may efface the footprints at any moment. It is the same with us; the most trifling incident may destroy the traces we are following up."

M. Verduret suddenly stopped before a door bearing the number 81. "We are going in here," he said to Prosper; "come along."

They went upstairs, and stopped on the second floor before a door over which was inscribed, "Modes and Confections." A handsome bell-rope was hanging against the wall, but M. Verduret did not touch it. He tapped with the ends of his fingers in a peculiar way, and the door instantly opened, as if some one had been watching for his signal on the other side.

A neatly dressed woman of about forty received Verduret and Prosper, and quietly ushered them into a small dining-room with several doors opening into it. This woman bowed respectfully to M. Verduret, as if he were some superior being. He scarcely noticed her salutation, but questioned her with a look, which asked, "Well?"

She nodded affirmatively, "Yes."

"In there?" asked M. Verduret in a low tone, pointing to one of the doors.

"No," replied the woman in the same tone; "there, in the little parlor."

M. Verduret opened the door of the room indicated, and pushed Prosper forward, whispering as he did so, "Go in, and keep your presence of mind."

But this injunction was useless. The instant he cast his eyes round the room into which he had so unceremoniously been pushed without any warning, Prosper exclaimed in a startled voice: "Madeleine!"

It was indeed M. Fauvel's niece, looking more beautiful than ever. Hers was that calm, dignified beauty which imposes admiration and respect. Standing in the middle of the room, near a table covered with silks and satins, she was arranging a skirt of red velvet embroidered in gold; probably the dress she was to wear as maid of honor to Catherine de Medicis. At sight

of Prosper, all the blood rushed to her face, and her beautiful eyes half closed, as if she were about to faint; she clung to the table to prevent herself from falling.

Prosper well knew that Madeleine was not one of those cold-hearted women whom nothing could disturb, and who feel sensations, but never a true sentiment. Of a tender, dreamy nature, she betrayed in the minute details of her life the most exquisite delicacy. But she was also proud, and incapable in any way of violating her conscience. When duty spoke, she obeyed.

She recovered from her momentary weakness, and the soft expression of her eyes changed to one of haughty resentment. In an offended tone she said: "What has emboldened you, sir, to be watching my movements? Who gave you permission to follow me—to enter this house?"

Prosper was certainly innocent. He longed with a word to explain what had just happened, but he was powerless to do so, and could only remain silent.

"You promised me upon your honor, sir," continued Madeleine, "that you would never again seek my presence. Is this the way you keep your word?"

"I did promise, mademoiselle, but—" He stopped.

"Oh, speak!"

"So many things have happened since that terrible day that I think I am excusable in forgetting for one hour an oath torn from me in a moment of blind weakness. It is to chance, at least to another will than my own, that I am indebted for the happiness of once more finding myself near you. Alas! the instant I saw you my heart bounded with joy. I did not think—no, I could not think—that you would prove more pitiless than strangers have been, that you would cast me off when I am so miserable and heartbroken."

Had not Prosper been so agitated he could have read in Madeleine's eyes—those beautiful eyes which had so long been the arbiters of his destiny—the signs of a great inward struggle.

It was, however, in a firm voice that she replied: "You know me well enough, Prosper, to be sure that no blow can strike you without reaching me at the same time. You suffer, I suffer with you: I pity you as a sister would pity a beloved brother."

"A sister!" said Prosper bitterly. "Yes, that was the word you used the day you banished me from your presence. A sister! Then why during three years did you delude me with vain hopes? Was I a brother to you the day we went to Notre

Dame de Fourvieres—that day when, at the foot of the altar, we swore to love each other forever and ever, and you fastened around my neck a holy relic, and said, 'Wear this always for my sake; never part from it, and it will bring you good fortune?'"

Madeleine attempted to interrupt him by a supplicating gesture; but he did not heed it, and continued with increased bitterness: "One month after that happy day—a year ago—you gave me back my promise, told me to consider myself free from any engagement, and never to come near you again. If I could have discovered in what way I had offended you—but no, you refused to explain. You drove me away, and to obey you I let every one suppose that I had left you of my own accord. You told me that an invincible obstacle had arisen between us, and I believed you, fool that I was! The obstacle was your own heart, Madeleine. I have always worn the relic; but it has not brought me happiness or good fortune."

Pale and motionless as a statue, Madeleine listened with bowed head and weeping eyes to these passionate reproaches.

"I told you to forget me," she murmured.

"Forget!" exclaimed Prosper excitedly, "forget! Can I forget? Is it in my power to stop, by an effort of will, the circulation of my blood? Ah! you have never loved! To forget, as to stop the beatings of the heart, there is but one means—death!"

This word, uttered with the fixed determination of a desperate, reckless man, caused Madeleine to shudder.

"Miserable man!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, miserable man, and a thousand times more miserable than you can imagine! You can never understand the tortures I have suffered, when for a year past I have awoke every morning, and said to myself, 'It is all over, she has ceased to love me!' This great sorrow stares me in the face day and night in spite of all my efforts to dispel it. And you speak of forgetting! I sought it in poisoned cups, but found it not. I tried to extinguish this memory of the past, which burns within me like a devouring flame, but in vain. When my body succumbed, my pitiless thoughts still survived. Do you wonder, then, that I should seek that rest which can only be obtained by suicide?"

"I forbid you to utter that word."

"You forget, Madeleine, that you have no right to forbid me now you love me no more."

With an imperious gesture, Madeleine interrupted him as if she wished to speak, and perhaps to explain all, to exculpate herself. But a sudden thought arrested her; she clasped her hands despairingly, and cried: "My God! this suffering is beyond endurance!"

Prosper seemed to misconstrue her words. "Your pity comes too late," he said. "There is no happiness in store for one like myself, who has had a glimpse of divine felicity, has had the cup of bliss held to his lips, and then dashed to the ground. There is nothing left to attach me to life. You have destroyed my holiest belief. I come forth from prison disgraced by my enemies; what is to become of me? Vainly do I question the future; for me there is no hope of happiness. I look around me to see nothing but abandonment, ignominy, and despair!"

"Prosper, my brother, my friend, if you only knew—"

"I know but one thing, Madeleine, which is, that you no longer love me, and that I love you more madly than ever. Oh, Madeleine, God only knows how I love you!"

He was silent. He hoped for an answer. None came. But suddenly the silence was broken by a stifled sob. It was Madeleine's maid, who, seated in a corner, was weeping bitterly. Madeleine had forgotten her presence.

Prosper on entering the room was so amazed on finding himself in the presence of Madeleine, that he noticed nothing else. With a feeling of surprise, he turned and looked at the weeping woman. He was not mistaken; this neatly dressed waiting-maid was Nina Gipsy.

Prosper was so startled that he became perfectly dumb. He stood there with ashy lips, and a chilly sensation creeping through his veins. He was terrified at the position in which he found himself. He was there, between the two women who had ruled his fate; between Madeleine, the proud heiress who spurned his love, and Nina Gipsy, the poor girl whose devotion to him he had so disdainfully rejected. And she had heard all! Poor Nina had heard the passionate avowal of her lover, had heard him swear that he could never love any woman but Madeleine, that if his love were not reciprocated he would kill himself, as he had nothing else to live for.

Prosper could judge of her sufferings by his own. For she was wounded not only in the present, but in the past. What must be her humiliation and anger on hearing the miserable part which he, in his disappointed love, had imposed upon her?

He was astonished that Nina—violence itself—remained silently weeping, instead of rising and bitterly denouncing him.

Meanwhile Madeleine had succeeded in recovering her usual calmness. Slowly and almost unconsciously she had put on her bonnet and mantle, which were lying on the sofa. Then she approached Prosper, and said: "Why did you come here? We both have need of all the courage we can command. You are unhappy, Prosper: I am more than unhappy, I am most wretched. You have a right to complain: I have not the right to shed a tear. While my heart is slowly breaking, I must wear a smiling face. You can seek consolation in the bosom of a friend: I can have no confidant but God."

Prosper tried to murmur a reply, but his pale lips refused to articulate; he was stifling. "I wish to tell you," continued Madeleine, "that I have forgotten nothing. But oh! let not this knowledge give you any hope: the future is blank for us; but if you love me you will live. You will not, I know, add to my already heavy burden of sorrow the agony of mourning your death. For my sake, live; live the life of a good man, and perhaps the day will come when I can justify myself in your eyes. And now, O my brother, O my only friend, adieu! adieu!" She pressed a kiss upon his brow, and rushed from the room, followed by Nina Gipsy!

Prosper was alone. He seemed to be awaking from a troubled dream. He tried to think over what had just happened, and asked himself if he were losing his mind, or whether he had really spoken to Madeleine and seen Nina? He was obliged to attribute all this to the mysterious power of the strange man whom he had seen for the first time that very morning. How did this individual gain this wonderful power of controlling events to suit his own purposes? He seemed to anticipate everything, to know everything. He was acquainted with Cavaillon, he knew all Madeleine's movements; he had made even Nina become humble and submissive.

While thinking over this, Prosper had reached such a degree of exasperation, that when M. Verduret entered the little parlor, he strode toward him white with rage, and, in a threatening voice, exclaimed:

"Who are you?"

The stout man did not manifest any surprise at this burst of anger, but quietly answered: "A friend of your father's; did you not know it?"

"That, sir, is no answer; I have been surprised into being influenced by a stranger, but now—"

"Do you want my biography—what I have been, what I am, and what I may be? What difference does it make to you? I told you that I would save you; the main point is that I am saving you."

"Still I have the right to ask by what means you are saving me."

"What good will it do you to know what my plans are?"

"In order to decide whether I will accept or reject them."

"But suppose I guarantee success?"

"That is not sufficient. I do not choose to be any longer deprived of my own free will—to be exposed, without warning, to trials like those I have undergone to-day. A man of my age must know what he is doing."

"A man of your age, Prosper, when he is blind, takes a guide, and does not undertake to point out the way to his leader."

The half-bantering, half-commiserating tone of M. Verduret was not calculated to calm Prosper's irritation.

"That being the case, sir," he exclaimed, "I will thank you for your past services, and decline them for the future, as I have no need of them. If I attempted to defend my honor and my life, it was because I hoped that Madeleine would be restored to me. I have been convinced to-day that all is at an end between us; I retire from the struggle, and care not what becomes of me now."

Prosper was so decided that M. Verduret seemed alarmed. "You must be mad," he firmly said.

"No, unfortunately I am not. Madeleine has ceased to love me, and of what importance is anything else?"

His heartbroken tone aroused M. Verduret's sympathy, and he said in a kind, soothing voice: "Then you suspect nothing? You did not fathom the meaning of what she said?"

"You were listening?" cried Prosper fiercely.

"I certainly was."—"Sir!"

"Yes. It was a presumptuous thing to do, perhaps, but the end justified the means in this instance. I am glad I did listen, because it enables me to say to you: Take courage, Prosper; Mademoiselle Madeleine loves you—she has never ceased to love you."

Like a dying man who eagerly listens to deceitful promises of recovery, although he feels himself sinking into the grave,

Prosper felt his sad heart cheered by M. Verduret's assertion. "Oh," he murmured, suddenly calmed, "if I only could hope!"

"Rely upon me, I am not mistaken. Ah, I could see the torture endured by this generous girl while she struggled between her love and what she believed to be her duty. Were you not convinced of her love when she bade you farewell?"

"She loves me, she is free, and yet she shuns me."

"No, she is not free! In breaking off her engagement with you, she was governed by some powerful, irrepressible event. She is sacrificing herself—for whom? We shall soon know; and the secret of her self-sacrifice will reveal to us the secret of the plot against you."

As M. Verduret spoke, Prosper felt his resolutions of revolt slowly melting away, and their place occupied by confidence and hope. "If what you say were only true!" he mournfully said.

"Foolish young man! Why do you persist in obstinately shutting your eyes to the proof I place before you? Can you not see that Mademoiselle Madeleine knows who the thief is? Yes, you need not look so shocked; she knows the thief, but no human power can tear it from her. She sacrifices you, but then she almost has the right, since she first sacrificed herself."

Prosper was almost convinced; and it nearly broke his heart to leave the little apartment where he had seen Madeleine. "Alas!" he said, pressing M. Verduret's hand, "you must think me a ridiculous fool! but you don't know how I suffer."

The man with the red whiskers sadly shook his head, and his voice sounded very unsteady as he replied in a low tone: "What you suffer, I have suffered. Like you, I loved, not a pure, noble girl, yet a girl fair to look upon. For three years I was at her feet, a slave to her every whim, when one day she suddenly deserted me who adored her, to throw herself into the arms of a man who despised her. Then, like you, I wished to die. Neither threats nor entreaties could induce her to return to me. Passion never reasons, and she loved my rival."

"And did you know who this rival was?"

"Yes, I knew."

"And you did not seek revenge?"

"No," replied M. Verduret. And with a singular expression he added: "For fate charged itself with my vengeance."

For a minute Prosper was silent; then he said: "I have finally decided. My honor is a sacred trust for which I must

account to my family. I am ready to follow you to the end of the world; dispose of me as you judge proper."

That same day Prosper, faithful to his promise, sold his furniture, and wrote to his friends announcing his intended departure for San Francisco. In the evening he and M. Verduret installed themselves at the hotel of the Grand Archangel.

Madame Alexandre gave Prosper her prettiest room, but it was very ugly compared with the coquettish little drawing-room in the Rue Chaptal. His state of mind did not permit him, however, to notice the difference between his former and present quarters. He lay on an old sofa, meditating upon the events of the day, and feeling a bitter satisfaction in his isolated condition. About eleven o'clock he thought he would open the window and let the cool air fan his burning brow; as he did so, a piece of paper was blown from among the folds of the window-curtain and lay at his feet on the floor.

Prosper mechanically picked it up and looked at it. It was covered with writing, the handwriting of Nina Gipsy; he could not be mistaken about that. It was the fragment of a torn letter; and if the half sentences did not convey any clear meaning, they were sufficient to lead the mind into all sorts of conjectures.

The fragment read as follows:

"of M. Raoul, I have been very im . . . plotted against him, of whom never . . . warn Prosper, and then . . . best friend, he . . . hand of Mademoiselle Ma . . ."

Prosper never closed his eyes all that night.

IX

NOT far from the Palais Royal, in the Rue St. Honore, is the sign of "La Bonne Foi," a small establishment, half cafe and half fruiterer's shop, much frequented by the work-people of the neighborhood.

It was in this modest cafe that Prosper, the day after his release, awaited M. Verduret, who had promised to meet him at four o'clock. Just as the clock struck the hour, M. Verduret,

who was punctuality itself, appeared. He was more red-faced and self-satisfied, if possible, than on the day before. As soon as the waiter, of whom he ordered a glass of beer, had left them, M. Verduret said to Prosper: "Well, are all our commissions executed?"

"Yes, every one."

"Have you seen the costumier?"

"I gave him your letter, and everything you ordered will be sent to the Grand Archangel to-morrow."

"Very good; you have not lost time, neither have I. I have a lot of news for you."

The "Bonne Foi" is almost deserted at four o'clock. The hour of coffee is passed, and the hour for absinthe has not yet come. M. Verduret and Prosper could therefore talk at their ease without fear of being overheard by listening neighbors. The former drew forth his precious diary, which, like the enchanted book in the fairy-tale, had an answer for every question. "While awaiting our emissaries whom I appointed to meet me here," said he, "let us devote a little time to M. de Lagors."

At this name Prosper did not protest, as he had done the previous day. Like those imperceptible insects which having once penetrated the root of a tree devour it in a single night, suspicion, when it invades our minds, soon develops itself and destroys our firmest beliefs. De Lagors's visit and the fragment of Gipsy's letter had filled Prosper with suspicions which had grown stronger and more settled as time went on.

"Do you know, my dear friend," asked M. Verduret, "what part of France this devoted friend of yours comes from?"

"He was born at St. Remy, which is also Madame Fauvel's native town."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Oh, perfectly! He has not only often told me so, but I have heard him tell M. Fauvel; and he would talk to Madame Fauvel by the hour about his mother, who was cousin to Madame Fauvel, and dearly beloved by her."

"Then you think there is no possible doubt or error about this part of his story?"

"None in the least."

"Well, things are assuming a queer appearance," said M. Verduret. And he began to whistle between his teeth, which, with him, was a sign of intense inward satisfaction.

"What do you refer to?" inquired Prosper.

"To what I have just discovered—to what I have all along expected. Good people!" he exclaimed, imitating the manner of a showman at a fair, "it is a lovely town, St. Remy, with six thousand inhabitants, charming boulevards on the site of the old fortifications, handsome town hall, numerous fountains, large charcoal market, silk factories, famous hospital, and so on."

Prosper was on thorns. "Please be so good," said he, "as to explain what you—"

"It also contains," continued M. Verduret, "a Roman triumphal arch, which is of unparalleled beauty, and a Greek mausoleum; but no De Lagors. St. Remy is the native town of Nostradamus, but not of your friend."

"Yet I have had proofs."

"Naturally. But proofs can be fabricated; relatives can be improvised. Your evidence is open to suspicion. My information is undeniable, perfectly authenticated. While you were pining in prison, I was preparing my batteries and collecting ammunition to open fire. I wrote to St. Remy, and received answers to my questions."

"Will you not let me know what they were?"

"Have patience," said M. Verduret as he turned over the leaves of his dairy. "Ah, here is number one. Bow to it respectfully, 'tis official." He then read:

" 'De Lagors—Very old family, originally from Maillane, settled at St. Remy about a century ago—' "

"I told you so," cried Prosper.

"Pray allow me to finish," said M. Verduret.

" 'The last of the De Lagors (Jules Rene Henri), bearing without clear authority the title of count, married in 1829 Mademoiselle Rosalie Clarisse Fontanet of Tarascon; died December, 1848, leaving two daughters, but no male issue. The town registers make no mention of any person in the district bearing the name of De Lagors.' "

"Now what do you think of this information?" asked the stout man with a triumphant smile.

Prosper was astounded. "But why, then, does M. Fauvel treat Raoul as his nephew?" he asked.

"Ah, you mean as his wife's nephew! Let us examine note number two: it is not official, but it throws a valuable light upon your friend's income of twenty thousand francs.

"'Jules Rene Henri de Lagors, last of his name, died at St. Remy on the 29th of December, 1848, in a state verging on poverty. He at one time was possessed of a moderate fortune, but invested it in a nursery for silkworms, and lost it all.

"'He had no son, but left two daughters, one of whom is a teacher at Aix, and the other married to a small tradesman at Orgon. His widow, who lives at Montagnette, is supported entirely by one of her relatives, the wife of a rich banker in Paris. No person of the name of De Lagors lives in the district of Arles.'"

"That is all," said M. Verduret; "do you think it enough?"

"Really, sir, I don't know whether I am awake or dreaming."

"You will be awake after awhile. Now, I wish to mention one thing. Some people may assert that the widow of De Lagors had a child born after her husband's death. This objection is destroyed by the age of your friend. Raoul is twenty-four, and M. de Lagors has not been dead twenty years."

"But," observed Prosper, thoughtfully, "who then can Raoul be?"

"I don't know. The fact is, I am more perplexed to find out who he is than to know who he is not. There is one man who could give us all the information we seek, but he will take good care to keep his mouth shut."

"You mean M. de Clameran?"

"Him, and no one else."

"I have always felt the most inexplicable aversion toward him. Ah, if we could only get an account of his life!"

"I have been furnished with a few notes concerning the De Clameran family by your father, who knew them well; they are brief, but I expect more."

"What did my father tell you?"

"Nothing favorable, you may be sure. I will read you the synopsis of his information:

"'Louis de Clameran was born at the Chateau de Clameran, near Tarascon. He had an elder brother named Gaston, who, in consequence of an affray in which he had the misfortune to kill a man and badly wound another, was compelled to fly the country in 1842. Gaston was an honest, noble youth, universally beloved. Louis, on the contrary, was a wicked, despicable fellow, detested by all who knew him.

"'Upon the death of his father, Louis came to Paris, and

in less than two years had squandered not only his own patrimony, but also the share of his exiled brother. Ruined and harassed by debt, Louis entered the army, but behaved so disgracefully that he was constantly being punished. After leaving the army we lose sight of him; all that is known is that he went to England, and thence to a German gambling resort, where he became notorious for his scandalous conduct.

" 'In 1865 we find him again in Paris. He was in great poverty, and his associates were among the most depraved classes. But he suddenly heard of the return of his brother Gaston to France. Gaston had made a fortune in Mexico; but being still a young man, and accustomed to a very active life, he purchased near Olcoron an iron foundry, intending to spend the remainder of his life in working it. Six months ago he died in the arms of his brother Louis. His death provided our De Clameran with an immense fortune, and the title of marquis.' "

"Then," said Prosper, "from all this I judge that M. de Clameran was very poor when I met him for the first time at M. Fauvel's?"

"Evidently."

"And shortly afterward De Lagors arrived from the country?"

"Precisely."

"And about a month after his appearance, Madeleine suddenly dismissed me?"

"Good," exclaimed M. Verduret, "I am glad you are beginning to understand the state of affairs." He was here interrupted by the entrance of a stranger. The newcomer was a dandified-looking coachman, with elegant black whiskers, shining boots with light tops, a yellow cap, and a red and black striped waistcoat. After cautiously looking round the room, he walked straight up to the table where M. Verduret sat.

"What is the news, Master Joseph Dubois?" asked the stout man eagerly.

"Ah, my chief, don't ask me!" answered the man. "Things are getting warm, very warm."

Prosper concentrated all his attention upon this superb servant. He thought he recognized his face. He had certainly somewhere seen that retreating forehead and those little restless black eyes, but where and when he could not remember. Meanwhile Master Joseph had taken a seat at a table adjoining the one occupied by M. Verduret and Prosper; and, having

called for some absinthe, was preparing it by holding the water aloft and slowly dropping it into the glass.

"What have you to tell me?" inquired M. Verduret.

"In the first place, my chief, I must say that the position of valet and coachman to M. de Clameran is by no means a bed of roses."

"Go on; come to the point. You can complain to-morrow."

"Very good. Yesterday my master walked out at two o'clock. I, of course, followed him. Do you know where he went? The thing was as good as a farce. He went to the Grand Archangel to see Madame Nina Gipsy."

"Well, make haste. They told him she was gone. What then?"

"What then? Ah! he was not at all pleased, I can tell you. He hurried back to the hotel where the other, M. de Lagors, awaited him. He swore like a trooper, and M. Raoul asked him what had happened to put him in such a bad humor. 'Nothing,' replied my master, 'except that the little devil has run off, and no one knows where she is; she has slipped through our fingers.' Then they both appeared to be vexed and uneasy. De Lagors asked if she knew anything serious. 'She knows nothing but what I told you,' replied De Clameran; 'but this nothing, falling into the ear of a man with any suspicions, will be more than enough to work on.'"

M. Verduret smiled like a man who had his reasons for appreciating at their just value De Clameran's fears. "Well, your master is not without sense after all," said he; "don't you think he showed it by saying that?"

"Yes, my chief. Then De Lagors exclaimed: 'If it is as serious as that, we must get rid of the little beggar!' But my master shrugged his shoulders, and, laughing loudly, said: 'You talk like an idiot; when one is annoyed by a woman of this sort, one must take measures to get rid of her administratively.' This idea seemed to amuse them both very much."

"I can understand their being entertained by it," said M. Verduret; "it is an excellent idea; but the misfortune is, it is too late to carry it out. The nothing which made De Clameran uneasy has already fallen into a knowing ear."

With breathless curiosity, Prosper listened to this report, every word of which seemed to throw light upon past events. Now, he thought, he understood the fragment of Gipsy's letter. He saw that this Raoul, in whom he had confided so deeply,

was nothing better than a scoundrel. A thousand little circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now recurred to his mind, and made him wonder how he could have remained blind so long.

Master Joseph Dubois continued his report:

"Yesterday, after dinner, my master decked himself out like a bridegroom. I shaved him, curled his hair, and perfumed him with especial care, after which I drove him to the Rue de Provence to call on Madame Fauvel."

"What!" exclaimed Prosper, "after the insulting language he used the day of the robbery, did he dare to visit the house?"

"Yes, my young gentleman; he not only dared this, but he also stayed there until nearly midnight, to my great discomfort; for I got thoroughly drenched while waiting for him."

"How did he look when he came out?" asked M. Verduret.

"Well, he certainly looked less pleased than when he went in. After putting up my carriage, and rubbing down my horse, I went to see if he wanted anything; I found the door locked, and he abused me without stint through the keyhole."

And to assist the digestion of this insult, Master Joseph here gulped down a mouthful of absinthe.

"Is that all?" questioned M. Verduret.

"All that occurred yesterday, my chief; but this morning my master rose late, still in a horribly bad humor. At noon Raoul arrived, also in a rage. They at once began to dispute, and there was such a row! Why, the most abandoned thieves would have blushed at their foul language. At one time my master seized the other by the throat and shook him like a reed. But Raoul was too quick for him, and saved himself from strangulation by drawing out a sharp-pointed knife, the sight of which made my master drop him in a hurry, I can tell you."

"But what was it that they said?"

"Ah, there is the rub, my chief," replied Joseph in a piteous tone; "the scamps spoke English, so I could not understand them. But I am sure they were disputing about money."

"How do you know that?"

"Because in view of the Exhibition I learned the word money in every language, and it constantly recurred in their conversation."

M. Verduret sat with knit brows, talking in an undertone to himself; and Prosper, who was watching him, wondered if he was trying to divine the subject of the dispute by the mere force of reflection.

"When they had done fighting," continued Joseph, "the rascals began to talk in French again; but they only spoke of a fancy ball which is to be given by some banker. When Raoul was leaving, my master said: 'Since this thing is inevitable, and must take place to-day, you had better remain at home, at Vesinet, this evening.' Raoul replied: 'Of course.'"

Evening was approaching, and the cafe was gradually filling with customers, who were all together calling for either absinthe or bitters. The waiters, mounting on stools, lit the gas-burners placed round the room. "It is time to go," said M. Verduret to Joseph, "your master may want you; besides, here is some one come for me. I will see you to-morrow."

The newcomer was no other than Cavaillon, more troubled and frightened than ever. He looked uneasily around, as if he expected a posse of policemen to make their appearance, and carry him off to prison. He did not sit down at M. Verduret's table, but stealthily gave his hand to Prosper, and, after assuring himself that no one was observing them, handed M. Verduret a parcel, saying: "She found this in the cupboard."

It was a handsomely bound prayer-book. M. Verduret rapidly turned over the leaves, and soon found the pages from which the words pasted on Prosper's letter had been cut. "I had moral proofs," he said, handing the book to Prosper, "but here is material proof sufficient in itself to save you."

When Prosper looked at the book, he turned as pale as a ghost. He recognized it instantly. He had given it to Madeleine in exchange for the relic. He opened it, and on the fly-leaf Madeleine had written "Souvenir of Notre Dame de Fourvieres, 17th January, 1866." "This book belongs to Madeleine," he cried.

M. Verduret did not reply, but walked toward a young man dressed like a wine cooper, who had just entered the cafe. Glancing at a note which this person handed to him, he hastened back to the table, and said in an agitated voice: "I think we have got them now!"

Throwing a five-franc piece on the table, and without saying a word to Cavaillon, M. Verduret seized Prosper's arm, and hurried from the room. "What a fatality!" he said, as he hastened along the street: "we may perhaps miss them. We shall certainly reach the St. Lazare station too late for the St. Germain train."

"For heaven's sake, where are you going?" asked Prosper.

"Never mind, we can talk after we start. Hurry!"

On arriving at the Place du Palais Royal, M. Verduret stopped in front of one of the cabs stationed there, and examined the horses at a glance. "How much will you want for driving us to Vesinet?" he asked the driver.

"I don't know the road very well," replied the cabman.

The name of Vesinet was enough for Prosper. "I will point out the road," he quickly said.

"Well," said the driver, "at this time of night, in such dreadful weather, it ought to be—twenty-five francs—"

"And to drive very fast?"

"Bless my soul! Why, I leave that to your honor's generosity; but if you put it at thirty-five francs—"

"You shall have a hundred," interrupted M. Verduret, "if you overtake a vehicle which has half an hour's start of us."

"By Jingo!" cried the delighted driver; "jump in quick: we are losing time!" And whipping up his lean horses, he galloped them down the Rue de Valois at a fearful speed.

X

ON quitting the little station of Vesinet, we come upon two roads. One, to the left, macadamized and kept in perfect repair, leads to the village, and along it glimpses are here and there obtained of the new church through the openings between the trees. The other road, newly laid out and scarcely leveled, leads through the woods. Along the latter, which before the lapse of five years will be a busy street, are a few houses, tasteless in design, rising here and there out of the foliage: rural retreats of Paris tradesmen, occupied only during the summer.

It was at the junction of these two roads that Prosper stopped the cab. The driver had gained his hundred francs. The horses were completely worn out, but they had accomplished all that was expected of them; M. Verduret could distinguish the lamps of another cab, about fifty yards ahead of him.

M. Verduret jumped out, and handing the driver a hundred-franc note, said: "Here is what I promised you. Go to the

first tavern on the right-hand side of the road as you enter the village. If we do not meet you there in an hour, you will be at liberty to return to Paris."

The driver was overwhelming in his thanks; but neither Prosper nor his friend heard them. They had already started along the new road. The weather, which had been inclement when they set out, was now fearful. The rain fell in torrents, and a furious wind howled dismally through the woods. The intense darkness was rendered more dreary by the occasional glimmer of the lamps of the distant railway station, and which seemed about to be extinguished by every fresh gust of wind.

M. Verduret and Prosper had been running along the muddy road for about five minutes, when suddenly the latter stopped and said: "This is Raoul's house."

Before the iron gate of an isolated house was the cab which M. Verduret had followed. In spite of the pouring rain, the driver, wrapped in a thick cloak, and leaning back on his seat, was already fast asleep, while waiting for the person whom he had brought to the house a few minutes ago.

M. Verduret pulled his cloak, and said, in a low voice: "Wake up, my good man."

The driver started, and mechanically gathering up his reins, yawned out: "I am ready; jump in!" But when, by the light of his lamps, he caught sight of two men in this lonely spot, he concluded they meant to rob him, and perhaps to take his life. "I am engaged!" he cried out, as he shook his whip; "I am waiting here for some one."

"I know that, you fool," replied M. Verduret, "and only wish to ask you a question, which you can gain five francs by answering. Did you not bring a middle-aged lady here?"

This question, with the promise of five francs, far from reassuring the cabman, only increased his alarm. "I have already told you I am waiting for some one," he said; "and if you don't go away and leave me alone, I will call out for help."

M. Verduret drew back quickly. "Come away," he whispered to Prosper, "the fool will do as he says; and the alarm once given, farewell to our projects. We must find some other entrance than by the gate."

They then went along the wall surrounding the garden, in search of a place where it was possible to scale it. This was difficult to discover, the wall being twelve feet high, and the night very dark. Fortunately, M. Verduret was very agile; and,

having decided upon the spot to be scaled, he drew back a few paces, and making a sudden spring, seized hold of one of the projecting stones on the top; then drawing himself up by the aid of his hands and feet, soon found himself astride the wall.

It was now Prosper's turn to climb up; but, though much younger than his companion, he had not his agility and strength, and would never have succeeded if M. Verduret had not pulled him up and then helped him down on the other side.

Once in the garden, M. Verduret looked about him to study the situation. The house occupied by M. de Lagors stood in the middle of a large garden. It was narrow, two stories high, and had attics. In only one window, on the second story, was there any light.

"As you have often been here," said M. Verduret, "you must know all about the arrangement of the house: what room is that where we see the light?"

"That is Raoul's bedchamber."

"Very good. What rooms are on the ground floor?"

"The kitchen, pantry, billiard-room, and dining-room."

"And on the floor above?"

"Two drawing-rooms, separated by folding-doors and a study."

"Where do the servants sleep?"

"Raoul has none at present. He is waited on by a man and his wife, who live at Vesinet; they come in the morning, and leave after dinner."

M. Verduret rubbed his hands gleefully. "That suits our plans exactly," he said; "it will be strange if we do not hear what Raoul has to say to this person who has come from Paris at this time of night to see him. Let us go in."

Prosper seemed averse to this, and said: "That would be a serious thing for us to do."

"Bless my soul! what else did we come here for?" exclaimed M. Verduret. "Did you think ours was a pleasure trip, merely to enjoy this lovely weather?" continued he in a bantering tone.

"But we might be discovered."

"Suppose we are? If the least noise betrays our presence, you have only to advance boldly as a friend come to visit a friend, and who, finding the door open, walked in."

But unfortunately the heavy oak door was locked. M. Verduret shook it in vain. "How foolish!" he said with vexation, "I ought to have brought my instruments with me. A common

lock which could be opened with a nail, and I have not even a piece of wire!" Seeing it useless to attempt the door, he tried successively every window on the ground floor. Alas! each shutter was securely fastened on the inside.

M. Verduret was provoked. He prowled round the house like a fox round a hen-roost, seeking an entrance, but finding none. Despairingly he came back to the spot in front of the house, whence he had the best view of the lighted window. "If I could only look in," he said. "To think that in there," and he pointed to the window, "is the solution of the mystery; and we are cut off from it by thirty feet or so of wall!"

Prosper was more surprised than ever at his companion's strange behavior. The latter seemed perfectly at home in this garden, and ran about it without any precaution. One would have supposed him accustomed to such expeditions, especially when he spoke of picking the lock of an occupied house, as coolly as though he were talking of opening a snuff-box. He was utterly indifferent to the rain and sleet driven in his face by the gusts of wind as he splashed about in the mud trying to find some means of entrance. "I must get a peep into that window," he said, "and I will certainly do so, cost what it may!"

Prosper seemed suddenly remember something. "There is a ladder here," he remarked in an undertone.

"Why did you not tell me that before? Where is it?"

"At the end of the garden, under the trees."

They ran to the spot, and in a few minutes the ladder was standing against the house. But to their annoyance they found it five feet too short. Five long feet of wall between the top of the ladder and the lighted window was a discouraging sight to Prosper, who exclaimed: "We can not reach it."

"We *can* reach it," cried M. Verduret triumphantly. And quickly seizing the ladder, he cautiously raised it, and rested the bottom round on his shoulders, holding, at the same time, the two uprights firmly and steadily with his hands. The obstacle was overcome. "Now mount," he said to his companion.

Prosper did not hesitate. Enthusiasm at seeing difficulties so skilfully conquered, and the hope of triumph, gave him a strength and agility which he had never imagined he possessed. He climbed up gently till he reached the lower rounds, then quickly mounted the ladder, which swayed and trembled beneath his weight.

But he had scarcely looked in at the lighted window when he uttered a cry, which was drowned in the roaring tempest, and sliding part way down the ladder, he dropped like a log on the wet grass, exclaiming: "The villain! the villain!"

With wonderful promptitude and vigor M. Verduret laid the ladder on the ground, and ran toward Prosper, fearing he was dangerously injured. "Are you hurt? What did you see?" he asked.

But Prosper had already risen. Although he had had a violent fall, he felt nothing; he was in that state when mind governs matter so absolutely that the body is insensible to pain. "I saw," he answered in a hoarse voice, "I saw Madeleine —do you understand, Madeleine?—in that room, alone with Raoul."

M. Verduret was confounded. Was it possible that he, the infallible expert, had been mistaken in his deductions?

He well knew that M. de Lagors's visitor was a woman; but his own conjectures, and the note which Madame Gipsy had sent to him at the cafe, had caused him to believe that this woman was Madame Fauvel.

"You must be mistaken," he said to Prosper.

"No, sir, no. Never could I mistake another for Madeleine. Ah! you who heard what she said to me yesterday, tell me: was I to have expected such infamous treason as this? You said to me then: 'She loves you, she loves you!' What do you think now? Speak!"

M. Verduret did not answer. He had been completely bewildered by his mistake, and was now racking his brain to discover the cause of it, which was soon discerned by his penetrating mind.

"This is the secret discovered by Nina," continued Prosper. "Madeleine, this pure and noble Madeleine, whom I believed to be as immaculate as an angel, is the mistress of this thief, who has even stolen the name he bears. And I, trusting fool that I was, made this scoundrel my best friend. I confided to him all my hopes and fears; and he was her lover! Of course they amused themselves by ridiculing my silly devotion and blind confidence!"

He stopped, overcome by his violent emotions. Wounded vanity is the worst of miseries. The certainty of having been so shamefully deceived and betrayed made Prosper almost insane with rage. "This is the last humiliation I shall submit

to," he fiercely cried. "It shall not be said that I was coward enough to let an insult like this go unpunished."

He started toward the house; but M. Verduret seized his arm, and said:

"What are you going to do?"

"To have my revenge! I will break down the door; what do I care for the noise and scandal, now that I have nothing to lose? I shall not attempt to creep into the house like a thief, but as a master—as one who has a right to enter; as a man who, having received a deadly insult, comes to demand satisfaction."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Prosper."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will!"

"You? Do not hope that you will be able to deter me. I will appear before them, put them to the blush, kill them both, and then put an end to my own wretched existence. That is what I intend to do, and nothing shall hinder me!"

If M. Verduret had not held Prosper with a vise-like grip, he would have escaped, and attempted to carry out his threat. "If you make any noise, Prosper, or raise an alarm, all your hopes are ruined," said M. Verduret.

"I have no hopes now."

"Raoul, put on his guard, will escape us, and you will remain dishonored forever."

"What is that to me?"

"It is everything to me. I have sworn to prove your innocence. A man of your age can easily find a wife, but can never restore lustre to a tarnished name. Let nothing interfere with the establishing of your innocence."

Genuine passion is uninfluenced by surrounding circumstances. M. Verduret and Prosper stood foot-deep in mud, wet to the skin, with the rain pouring down on their heads, and yet still continued their dispute. "I will be avenged," repeated Prosper, with the persistency of a fixed idea: "I will be avenged."

"Well, avenge yourself then like a man, and not like a child!" said M. Verduret angrily.

"Sir!"

"Yes, I repeat it, like a child. What will you do after you get into the house? Have you any arms? No. You rush upon Raoul, and a struggle ensues; and while you two are

fighting, Madeleine jumps in the cab and drives off. What then? Which is the stronger, you or Raoul?"

Overcome by the sense of how powerless he was, Prosper remained silent.

"And of what use would arms be?" continued M. Verduret. "It would be the height of folly to shoot a man whom you can send to the galleys."

"What then shall I do?"

"Wait. Vengeance is a delicious fruit, which must be allowed to ripen in order that it may be fully enjoyed."

Prosper was unsettled in his resolution; M. Verduret, seeing this, advanced his last and strongest argument. "How do we know," said he, "that Mademoiselle Madeleine is here on her own account? Did we not come to the conclusion that she was sacrificing herself for the benefit of some one else? That superior will which compelled her to banish you may have constrained this step to-night."

Whatever coincides with our secret wishes is always eagerly welcomed, and this apparently improbable supposition struck Prosper as being possibly correct.

"That might be the case," he murmured, "who knows?"

"I would soon know," said M. Verduret, "if I could only see them together in that room."

"Will you promise me, sir, to tell me the truth, exactly what you yourself think, no matter how painful it may be for me?"

"I swear it, upon my word of honor."

At these words Prosper, with a strength which a few minutes before he would not have believed himself possessed of, raised the ladder, placed the last round on his shoulders, and said to M. Verduret:

"Mount!"

M. Verduret rapidly ascended the ladder, scarcely shaking it, and soon had his head on a level with the window. Prosper had seen but too well. There was Madeleine, at this hour of the night, alone with Raoul de Lagors in his bedchamber!

M. Verduret noticed that she still wore her bonnet and mantle. She was standing in the middle of the room, talking with great animation. Her look and gestures betrayed indignant scorn. There was an expression of ill-disguised loathing upon her beautiful face. Raoul was seated in a low chair by the fire, stirring up the embers with a pair of tongs. Every now and then he would shrug his shoulders, like a man resigned to

everything he heard, and had no answer to make beyond: "I can not help it. I can do nothing for you."

M. Verduret would willingly have given the handsome ring on his finger to be able to hear what was being said; but the roaring wind completely drowned the voices of the speakers, and he dared not place his ear close to the window for fear of being perceived. "They are evidently quarreling," he thought; "but it is certainly not a lovers' quarrel."

Madeleine continued talking; and it was by closely watching Raoul's face, clearly revealed by the lamp on the chimney-piece, that M. Verduret hoped to discover the meaning of the scene before him. Now and again De Lagors would start and tremble in spite of his pretended indifference; or else he would strike at the fire with the tongs, as if giving vent to his rage at some reproach uttered by Madeleine. Finally, Madeleine changed her threats into entreaties, and, clasping her hands, almost fell on her knees. Raoul turned away his head, and refused to answer save in monosyllables.

Several times she was about to leave the room, but each time returned, as if asking a favor, and unable to make up her mind to quit the house till she had obtained it. At last she seemed to have uttered something decisive; for Raoul quickly rose and took from a desk near the fireplace a bundle of papers, which he handed to her.

"Well," thought M. Verduret, "this looks bad. Can it be a compromising correspondence which the young lady wants to secure!"

Madeleine took the papers, but was apparently still dissatisfied. She seemed to entreat Raoul to give her something else, but he refused; and she then threw the papers on the table. These papers puzzled M. Verduret very much, as he gazed at them through the window. "I am not blind," he said, "and I certainly am not mistaken; those red, green, and gray papers are evidently pawn tickets!"

Madeleine turned over the papers as if looking for some particular ones. She selected three, which she put in her pocket, disdainfully pushing the others aside. She was now evidently preparing to take her departure, and said a few words to Raoul, who took up the lamp as if to escort her downstairs.

There was nothing more for M. Verduret to see. He carefully descended the ladder, muttering to himself: "Pawn tickets! What infamous mystery lies at the bottom of all this?" The

first thing to be done was to hide the ladder. Raoul might take it into his head to look round the garden, when he came to the door with Madeleine, and if he did so the ladder could scarcely fail to attract his attention. M. Verduret and Prosper hastily laid it on the ground, regardless of the shrubs which they destroyed in doing so, and then concealed themselves among the trees, whence they could watch at once the front door and the outer gate.

Madeleine and Raoul appeared in the doorway. Raoul placed the lamp on the floor, and offered his hand to the girl; but she refused it with haughty contempt, which somewhat soothed Prosper's lacerated heart. This scornful behavior did not, however, seem to surprise or hurt Raoul, who simply answered by an ironical gesture which implied, "As you please!" He followed Madeleine to the gate, which he opened and closed after her; then he hurried back to the house, while the cab drove rapidly away.

"Now," said Prosper, "you must tell me what you think. You promised to let me know the truth no matter how bitter it might be. Speak; I can bear it, be it what it may!"

"You will have only joy to bear, my friend. Within a month you will bitterly regret your suspicions of to-night. You will blush to think that you ever imagined Mademoiselle Madeleine to have been the mistress of a man like De Lagors."

"But, sir, appearances—"

"It is precisely against appearances that we must be on our guard. Always distrust them. A suspicion, false or just, is necessarily based on something. But we must not stay here forever; and as Raoul has fastened the gate, we shall have to climb over the wall."

"But there is the ladder."

"Let it stay where it is; as we can not efface our footprints, he will think thieves have been trying to get into the house." They scaled the wall, and had not walked fifty steps when they heard the noise of a gate being unlocked. They stood aside and waited; a man soon passed by on his way to the station.

"That is Raoul," said M. Verduret, "and Joseph will report to us that he has been to tell De Clameran what has just taken place. If they are only kind enough to speak French!" M. Verduret walked along quietly for some time, trying to connect the broken chain of his deductions. "Why the deuce," he

abruptly asked, "did this Raoul, who is devoted to gay society, come to choose a lonely country house like this to live in?"

"I suppose it was because M. Fauvel's villa is only fifteen minutes' ride from here, on the banks of the Seine."

"That accounts for his staying here in the summer; but in winter?"

"Oh, in winter he has a room at the Hotel du Louvre, and all the year round keeps up an apartment in Paris."

This did not enlighten M. Verduret much; he hurried his pace. "I hope our driver has not gone," said he. "We can not take the train which is about to start, as Raoul would see us at the station."

Although it was more than an hour since M. Verduret and Prosper left the cab, where the road turned off, they found it waiting for them in front of the tavern.

The driver, being unable to resist the desire to change his bank-note, had ordered supper, and finding the wine very good, he was in no hurry to leave.

While delighted at the idea of having a fare back to Paris, he could not refrain from remarking on M. Verduret and Prosper's altered appearance. "Well, you are in a strange state!" he exclaimed.

Prosper replied that they had been to see a friend, and losing their way, had fallen into a quagmire; as if there were such things in Vesinet wood.

"So that's the way you got covered with mud, is it!" exclaimed the driver, who, though apparently contented with this explanation, strongly suspected that his two customers had been engaged in some nefarious transaction. This opinion seemed to be entertained by the people present, for they looked at Prosper's muddy clothes and then at each other in a knowing way.

But M. Verduret put an end to all further comment by saying: "Come on!"

"All right, your honor: get in while I settle my bill; I will be with you in a minute."

The drive back was silent and seemed interminably long. Prosper at first tried to draw his strange companion into conversation, but as he received nothing but monosyllables in reply, he held his peace for the rest of the journey. He was again beginning to feel irritated at the absolute empire exercised over him by this man. Physical discomfort was added

to his other troubles. He was stiff and numb; every bone in him ached with the cold. Although mental endurance may be unlimited, bodily strength must in the end give way. A violent effort is always followed by reaction.

Lying back in a corner of the cab, with his feet upon the front seat, M. Verduret seemed to be enjoying a nap; yet he was never more wide awake. He was in a perplexed state of mind. This expedition, which he had been confident would solve all his doubts, had only added mystery to mystery. His chain of evidence, which he thought so strongly linked, was completely broken. For him the facts remained the same, but circumstances had changed. He could not imagine what common motive, what moral or material complicity, what influences, existed to cause the four actors in his drama, Madame Fauvel, Madeleine, Raoul, and De Clameran, to have apparently the same object in view. He was seeking, in his fertile mind, that encyclopedia of craft and subtlety, for some combination which would throw light on the problem before him.

Midnight struck as they reached the Grand Archangel, and for the first time M. Verduret remembered that he had not dined. Fortunately Madame Alexandre was still up, and in the twinkling of an eye had improvised a tempting supper. It was more than attention, more than respect, that she showed her guest. Prosper observed that she gazed admiringly at M. Verduret all the while that he was eating.

"You will not see me during the daytime to-morrow," said M. Verduret to Prosper, when he had risen to leave the room; "but I will be here about this time at night. Perhaps I shall discover what I am seeking at Jandidiers' ball."

Prosper was almost dumb with astonishment. What! would M. Verduret venture to appear at a fancy dress ball given by the wealthiest and most fashionable bankers in Paris? This accounted for his sending to the costumier. "Then you are invited to this ball?" he presently asked.

The expressive eyes of M. Verduret sparkled with amusement. "Not yet," he said; "but I shall be."

Oh, the inconsistency of the human mind! Prosper was tormented by the most serious reflections. He looked sadly round his chamber, and as he thought of M. Verduret's projected pleasure at the ball, exclaimed: "Ah, how fortunate he is! To-morrow he will see Madeleine more lovely than ever."

ABOUT the middle of the Rue St. Lazare are the almost regal residences of the brothers Jandidier, two celebrated financiers, who, if deprived of the prestige of immense wealth, would still be looked up to as remarkable men. Why can not the same be said of all men?

These two mansions, which were regarded as marvels of magnificence at the time they were built, are entirely distinct from each other, but so planned as to form a single building when this is desired. When the brothers Jandidier give grand parties, they have the movable partitions taken away, and thus obtain the most superb suite of drawing-rooms in Paris. Princely magnificence, lavish hospitality, and an elegant, graceful manner of receiving their guests, make the entertainments given by the brothers eagerly sought after by the fashionable circles of the capital. On the Saturday the Rue St. Lazare was blocked up by a file of carriages, whose fair occupants impatiently awaited their turn to alight. Dancing commenced at ten o'clock. The ball was a fancy dress one, and the majority of the costumes were superb; many were in the best taste, and some were quite original. Among the latter was that of a merry-andrew. Everything about the wearer was in perfect keeping: the insolent eye, coarse lips, inflamed cheek-bones, and a beard so red that it seemed to emit fire in the reflection of the dazzling lights.

He carried in his left hand a canvas banner, upon which were six or eight coarsely painted pictures, like those seen at country fairs. In his right he waved a little switch, with which he would every now and then strike his banner, after the fashion of a showman seeking to attract the attention of the crowd. A compact group gathered round him in the expectation of hearing some witty speeches; but he remained silent, near the door.

About half-past ten he quitted his post. M. and Madame Fauvel, followed by their niece Madeleine, had just entered.

During the last ten days the affair of the Rue de Provence had been the general topic of conversation; and friends and enemies were alike glad to seize this opportunity of approaching the banker to tender their sympathy, or to offer equivocal condolence, which of all things is the most exasperating and insulting.

Belonging to the class of men of a serious turn, M. Fauvel had not assumed a fancy costume, but had merely thrown over his shoulders a short silk cloak. On his arm leaned Madame Fauvel, *née* Valentine de la Verberie, bowing and gracefully greeting her numerous friends.

She had once been remarkably beautiful; and to-night, in the artificial light, her very becoming dress seemed to have restored all her youthful freshness and comeliness. No one would have supposed her to be forty-eight years old. She wore a robe of embroidered satin and black velvet, of the later years of Louis XIV's reign, magnificent and severe, without the adornment of a single jewel. She looked superb and grand in her court dress and her powdered hair, as became a La Verberie, so some ill-natured people remarked, who had made the mistake of marrying a man of money.

Madeleine, too, on her part was the object of universal admiration, so dazzlingly beautiful and queen-like did she appear in her costume of maid of honor, which seemed to have been especially invented to set forth her beautiful figure. Her loveliness expanded in the perfumed atmosphere and dazzling light of the ballroom. Never had her hair looked so brilliant a black, her complexion so exquisite, or her large eyes so sparkling. Having greeted their hosts, Madeleine took her aunt's arm, while M. Fauvel wandered about in search of the card-tables, the usual refuge of bored men who find themselves enticed into a ballroom.

Dancing was now at its height. Two orchestras, led by Strauss and one of his lieutenants, filled the saloons with intoxicating sounds. The motley crowd whirled in the waltz, presenting a curious confusion of velvets, satins, laces, and diamonds. Almost every head and bosom sparkled with jewels; the palest cheeks became rosy; heavy eyes now shone like stars; and the glistening shoulders of fair women were like drifted snow in an April sun.

Forgotten by the crowd, the merry-andrew had taken refuge in the embrasure of a window, and seemed to be meditating

upon the gay scene before him; at the same time he kept his eyes upon a couple not far distant. It was Madeleine, leaning on the arm of a gorgeously attired doge, that attracted his gaze, and the doge was the Marquis de Clameran, who appeared radiant, rejuvenated, and whose attentions to his partner had an air of triumph. At an interval in the quadrille, he leaned over her and whispered compliments of unbounded admiration; and she seemed to listen, if not with pleasure, at least without repugnance. She now and then smiled, and coquettishly shrugged her shoulders.

"Evidently," muttered the merry-andrew, "this noble scoundrel is paying court to the banker's niece; so I was right yesterday. But how can Mademoiselle Madeleine resign herself so graciously to his insipid flattery? Fortunately, Prosper is not here now."

He was interrupted by an elderly man wrapped in a Venetian mantle, who said to him: "You remember, M. Verduret"—this name was uttered half-seriously, half-banteringly—"what you promised me?"

The merry-andrew bowed with great respect, but not the slightest shade of humility. "I remember," he replied.

"But do not be imprudent, I beg you."

"Monsieur le Comte need not be uneasy; he has my promise."

"Very good. I know its value." The comte walked off; but during this short colloquy the quadrille had ended, and M. de Clameran and Madeleine were lost to sight.

"I shall find them near Madame Fauvel," thought the merry-andrew. And he at once started in search of the banker's wife.

Incommoded by the stifling heat of the room, Madame Fauvel had sought a little fresh air in the grand picture gallery, which, thanks to the talisman called gold, was now transformed into a fairy-like garden, filled with orange trees, japonicas, oleanders, and white lilacs, the delicate bunches of which hung in graceful clusters. The merry-andrew saw her seated near the door of the card-room. Upon her right was Madeleine, and on her left stood Raoul de Lagors, dressed in a costume of the time of Henry III.

"I must confess," muttered the merry-andrew from his post of observation, "that the young scamp is a handsome-looking fellow."

Madeleine appeared very sad. She had plucked a camellia from a plant near by, and was mechanically pulling it to pieces

as she sat with her eyes cast down. Raoul and Madame Fauvel were engaged in earnest conversation. Their faces seemed composed, but the gestures of the one and the trembling of the other betrayed that a serious discussion was taking place between them. In the card-room sat the doge, M. de Clameran, so placed as to have a full view of Madame Fauvel and Madeleine, although he was himself concealed by an angle of the apartment.

"It is the continuation of yesterday's scene," thought the merry-andrew. "If I could only get behind those camellias, I might hear what they are saying." He pushed his way through the crowd, but just as he had reached the desired spot, Madeleine rose, and, taking the arm of a bejeweled Persian, walked away. At the same moment Raoul went into the card-room and whispered a few words to De Clameran.

"There they go," muttered the merry-andrew. "The pair of scoundrels certainly hold these poor women in their power; and it is in vain that they struggle to free themselves. What can be the secret of their influence?"

Suddenly a great commotion was caused in the picture gallery by the announcement of a wonderful minuet to be danced in the grand saloon; then by the arrival of the Comtesse de Commarin as Aurora; and finally, by the presence of the Princess Korasoff, with her superb suite of emeralds, reported to be the finest in the world. In an instant the gallery became almost deserted.

Only a few forlorn-looking people remained; mostly sulky husbands, whose wives were dancing with partners they were jealous of, and some melancholy youths, looking awkward and unhappy in their gay fancy dresses. The merry-andrew thought the opportunity favorable for carrying out his designs. He abruptly left his corner, brandishing his banner, and tapping upon it with his switch, hammering affectedly all the time, as though about to speak. Having crossed the gallery, he placed himself between the chair occupied by Madame Fauvel and the door. As soon as the people left in the gallery had collected in a circle round him, he struck a comical attitude, and in a tone of great buffoonery proceeded to address them as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this morning I obtained a license from the authorities of this city. And for what? Why, gentlemen, for the purpose of exhibiting to you a spectacle which

has already excited the admiration of the four quarters of the globe, and of several other academies. Inside this booth, ladies, is about to commence the representation of a most unheard-of drama, acted for the first time at Pekin, and translated by our most famous authors. Gentlemen, you can take your seats at once; the lamps are lighted, and the actors are dressing."

Here he stopped speaking, and imitated to perfection the screeching sounds which mountebanks educe from their musical instruments. "Now, ladies and gentlemen," he resumed, "you will wish to know what I am doing here if the piece is to be performed inside the booth. The fact is, gentlemen, that I intend to give you a foretaste of the agitations, sensations, emotions, palpitations, and other entertainments which you may enjoy for the small sum of ten sous. You see this superb picture? Well, it represents the eight most thrilling scenes in the drama. Ah, you begin to shudder already; and yet this is nothing compared to the play itself. This splendid picture gives you no more idea of the actual performance than a drop of water gives an idea of the sea, or a spark of fire of the sun. My picture, gentlemen, is merely a foretaste of what takes place inside, like the odors which emanate from the kitchen of a restaurant."

"Do you know the fellow?" asked an enormous Turk of a melancholy Punch.

"No, but he imitates a trumpet splendidly."

"Oh, very well indeed! But what is he driving at?"

He was endeavoring to attract the attention of Madame Fauvel, who, since Raoul and Madeleine had left her, had abandoned herself to a mournful reverie. He succeeded in his object. His shrill voice brought the banker's wife back to a sense of reality; she started and looked quickly about her, as if suddenly awakened; then she turned toward the merry-andrew.

He, however, continued: "Now, ladies, we are in China. The first of the eight pictures on my canvas, here, in the left hand corner,"—here he touched the top daub,—"represents the celebrated Mandarin Li-Fô, in the bosom of his family. The pretty young lady leaning over him is his wife; and the children playing on the carpet are the bonds of love between this happy pair. Do you not inhale the odor of contentment and happiness emanating from this admirable picture, gentlemen? Madame Li-Fô is the most virtuous of women, adoring her husband and idolizing her children. Being virtuous she is happy,

or as the wise Confucius says, 'The ways of virtue are more pleasant than the ways of vice.'"

Madame Fauvel had quitted her seat, and taken another nearer to the speaker.

"Do you see anything on the banner like what he has been describing?" asked the melancholy Punch of his neighbor.

"No, nothing. Do you?"

The fact is, that the daubs of paint on the canvas represented nothing in particular, so that the merry-andrew could pretend they were anything he pleased.

"Picture No. 2!" he cried, after a flourish of music. "This old lady, seated before a mirror tearing out her hair—especially the gray ones—you have seen before; do you recognize her? No, you do not. Well, she is the fair mandarine of the first picture. I see the tears in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. Ah, you have cause to weep; for she is no longer virtuous, and her happiness has departed with her virtue. Alas, it is a sad tale! One fatal day she met in a street of Pekin a young ruffian, fiendish, but beautiful as an angel, and she loves him—the wretched woman loves him!"

The last words were uttered in the most tragic tone as he raised his clasped hands to heaven. During this tirade he had turned slightly round, so that he now found himself facing the banker's wife, whose countenance he closely watched while he was speaking.

"You are surprised, gentlemen," he continued; "I am not. The great Bilboquet, my master, has proved to us that the heart never grows old, and that the most vigorous wall-flowers flourish on the oldest ruins. This unhappy woman is nearly fifty years old—fifty years old, and in love with a youth! Hence this heartrending scene which should serve as a warning to us all."

"Really!" grumbled a cook dressed in white satin, who had passed the evening distributing bills of fare, which no one read; "I thought he would be more amusing."

"But," continued the merry-andrew, "you must go inside the booth to witness the effects of the mandarine's folly. At times a ray of reason penetrates her diseased brain, and then the sight of her anguish would soften a heart of stone. Enter, and for the small sum of ten sous you shall hear sobs such as the Odeon Theatre never echoed in its halcyon days. The unhappy woman has waked up to the absurdity and inanity of

her blind passion; she confesses to herself that she is madly pursuing a fantom. She knows but too well that he, in the vigor and beauty of youth, can not love a faded old woman like herself, who vainly endeavors to retain the last traces of her once entrancing beauty. She feels that the sweet words he once whispered in her charmed ear were deceitful falsehoods. She knows that the day is near when she will be left alone, with nothing save his mantle in her hand."

As the merry-andrew addressed this voluble harangue to the crowd around him, he narrowly watched the countenance of the banker's wife. But nothing he had said seemed to affect her. She leaned back in her armchair, perfectly calm, with the accustomed brightness in her eyes and an occasional smile upon her lips.

"Good heavens!" muttered the merry-andrew uneasily, "can I be on the wrong track?" Preoccupied, however, as he was, he observed an addition to his circle of listeners in the person of M. de Clameran. "The third picture," said he, after imitating a roll of drums, "depicts the old mandarine after she has dismissed that most annoying of guests—remorse—from her bosom. She promises herself that interest will supply the place of love in chaining the too seductive youth to her side. It is with this object that she invests him with false honors and dignity, and introduces him to the chief mandarins of the capital of the Celestial Empire; then, since so handsome a youth must cut a fine figure in society, and as a fine figure can not be cut without money, the lady sacrifices all she possesses for his sake. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, diamonds, and pearls, are all surrendered. The monster carries all these jewels to the pawnbrokers in the Tien-Tsi Street, and then has the cruelty to refuse her the tickets, by means of which she might redeem her treasures."

The merry-andrew thought that he had at last hit the mark. Madame Fauvel began to betray signs of agitation. Once she made an attempt to rise from her seat and to retire, but it seemed as if her strength failed her, and she sank back, forced to listen to the end.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen," continued the merry-andrew, "the richly filled jewel-cases became empty. The day arrived when the mandarine had nothing more to give. It was then that the young scoundrel conceived the project of carrying off the jasper button belonging to the mandarin Li-Fô—a splendid

jewel of incalculable value, which, being the badge of his dignity, was kept in a granite stronghold, and guarded by three soldiers night and day. Ah! the mandarine resisted for a long time! She knew the innocent soldiers would be accused and crucified, as is the custom in Pekin, and this thought restrained her. But her lover besought her so tenderly that she finally yielded to his entreaties; and—the jasper button was stolen. The fourth picture represents the guilty couple stealthily creeping down the private staircase: see their frightened looks—see—"

The merry-andrew abruptly stopped. Three or four of his auditors rushed to the assistance of Madame Fauvel, who seemed about to faint; and at the same moment he felt his arm roughly seized by some one behind him. He turned round and found himself face to face with M. de Clameran and Raoul de Lagors, both of whom were pale with anger.

"What do you require, gentlemen?" he asked politely.

"To speak with you," they answered in a breath.

"I am at your service." And he followed them to the end of the picture gallery, near a window opening on to a balcony. Here they were unobserved except by the man in the Venetian cloak, whom the merry-andrew had so respectfully addressed as "Monsieur le Comte." The minuet having ended, the musicians were resting, and the crowd began rapidly to fill the gallery. Madame Fauvel's sudden faintness had passed off unnoticed save by a few, who attributed it to the heat of the room. M. Fauvel had been sent for; but when he came hurrying in, and found his wife composedly talking to Madeleine, his alarm was dissipated, and he returned to the card-tables.

Not having as much control over his temper as Raoul, M. de Clameran angrily remarked to the merry-andrew: "In the first place, sir, I should like to know whom I am speaking to."

The merry-andrew, determined to answer as if he thought the question were a jest, replied in the bantering tone of a buffoon: "You want my passport, do you, my lord doge? I left it in the hands of the city authorities; it contains my name, age, profession, domicile, and every detail."

With an angry gesture, M. de Clameran interrupted him. "You have just committed a most vile action!"

"I, my lord doge?"

"Yes, you! What is the meaning of the abominable story you have been relating?"

"Abominable! You may say so, if you like; but I, who composed it, entertain a different opinion."

"Enough, sir; you might at least have the courage to acknowledge that your allusions conveyed a vile insinuation against Madame Fauvel."

The merry-andrew stood with his head thrown back, and mouth wide open, as if astounded at what he heard. But any one who knew him would have detected his bright black eyes sparkling with malicious satisfaction.

"Bless my heart!" he cried, as if speaking to himself. "This is the strangest thing I ever heard of! How can my drama of the Mandarine Li-Fo have any reference to Madame Fauvel, whom I don't know from Adam or Eve? I can't think how the resemblance—unless—but no, that is impossible."

"Do you pretend," said M. de Clameran, "to be ignorant of M. Fauvel's misfortune?"

The merry-andrew looked very innocent, and asked: "A misfortune?"

"I mean the robbery of which M. Fauvel is the victim. It is in every one's mouth, and you must have heard of it."

"Ah, yes, yes; I remember. His cashier has run off with three hundred and fifty thousand francs. Gracious me! It is a thing that almost happens daily. But, as to discovering any connection between this robbery and my story, that is quite another matter."

M. de Clameran did not hasten to reply. A nudge from De Lagors had calmed him as if by enchantment. He looked suspiciously at the mountebank, and seemed to regret having uttered the significant words forced from him by angry excitement. "Very well," he finally said in his usual haughty tone: "I must have been mistaken. I accept your explanation."

But the merry-andrew, hitherto so humble and foolish-looking, seemed to take offense at the last word, and, assuming a defiant attitude, exclaimed: "I have not given, nor had I to give, any explanation."

"Sir!" began De Clameran.

"Allow me to finish, if you please. If, unintentionally, I have offended the wife of a man whom I highly esteem, it is, I fancy, his business to seek redress, and not yours. Perhaps you will tell me he is too old to demand satisfaction, very likely; but he has sons, and I have just seen one of them here. You ask who I am; in return I ask you who are you—you who under-

take to act as Madame Fauvel's champion? Are you her relative, friend, or ally? What right have you to insult her by pretending to discover an allusion to her in a story invented for amusement?"

There was nothing to be said in reply to this. M. de Clameran sought a means of evading a complete answer. "I am a friend of M. Fauvel's," he said, "and this title gives me the right to be as jealous of his reputation as if it were my own. If you do not think this a sufficient reason for my interference, I must inform you that his family will shortly be mine."

"Ah!"

"Next week, sir, my marriage with Mademoiselle Madeleine will be publicly announced."

This news was so unexpected, so strange, that for a moment the merry-andrew was fairly astounded. But he soon recovered himself, and, bowing with deference, said, with covert irony: "Permit me to offer you my congratulations, sir. Besides being the belle of to-night's ball, Mademoiselle Madeleine is worth, I hear, half a million."

Raoul de Lagors had anxiously been watching the people near them, to see if they overheard this conversation. "We have had enough of this gossip," he said in a disdainful tone; "I will only say one thing to you, my fine fellow, and that is, your tongue is too long."

"Perhaps it is, my pretty youth, perhaps it is; but my arm is still longer."

De Clameran here interrupted them by exclaiming: "It is impossible to have an explanation with a man who conceals his identity under the guise of a fool."

"You are at liberty, my lord doge, to ask the master of the house who I am—if you dare."

"You are," cried Clameran, "you are—" A warning look from Raoul checked the noble iron-founder from using an epithet which might have led to an affray, or at least a scandalous scene.

The merry-andrew stood by with a sardonic smile, and, after a moment's silence, stared M. de Clameran steadily in the face, and, in measured tones, said: "I was the best friend, sir, that your dead brother Gaston ever had. I was his adviser, and the confidant of his last hopes."

These words came like a clap of thunder on De Clameran, who turned deadly pale, and started back with his hands

stretched out before him, as if shrinking from a fantom. He tried to answer, to protest, to say something, but terror froze the words upon his tongue.

"Come, let us go," said De Lagors, who had remained perfectly self-possessed. And he dragged De Clameran away, half supporting him, for he staggered like a drunken man, and clung to every object he passed, to prevent himself from falling.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed the merry-andrew, in three different tones. He was almost as much astonished as the forge-master, and remained rooted to the spot watching the latter as he slowly left the room. It was with no decided object in view that the merry-andrew had ventured to use the last mysteriously threatening words, but he had been inspired to do so by his wonderful instinct, which with him was like the scent of a bloodhound. "What can this mean?" he murmured. "Why was he so frightened? What terrible memory have I awakened in his base soul? I need not boast of my penetration, or the subtlety of my plans. There is a great master, who, without any effort, in an instant destroys all our chimeras; he is called 'Chance.'"

His mind had wandered far from the present scene, when he was brought back to his situation by some one touching him on the shoulder. It was the man in the Venetian cloak. "Are you satisfied, M. Verduret?" he inquired.

"Yes and no, Monsieur the Comte. No, because I have not completely achieved the object I had in view when I asked you to obtain an invitation for me here to-night; yes, because these two rascals behaved in a manner which dispels all doubt."

"And yet you complain—"

"I do not complain, sir; on the contrary, I bless chance, or rather Providence, which has just revealed to me the existence of a secret that I did not before even suspect."

Five or six people approached the comte, and he went off with them after giving M. Verduret a friendly nod. The latter instantly threw aside his banner, and started in pursuit of Madame Fauvel. He found her sitting on a sofa, in the ball-room, engaged in an animated conversation with Madeleine. "Of course they are talking over the scene; but what has become of De Lagors and De Clameran?" thought he. He soon caught sight of them wandering among the groups scattered about the room, and eagerly asking questions. "I will

bet my head," he muttered, "these honorable gentlemen are trying to find out who I am. Ask away, my friends, ask away!"

They soon gave over their inquiries, but were so preoccupied, and anxious to be alone in order to reflect and deliberate, that, without waiting for the supper, they took leave of Madame Fauvel and her niece, saying they were going home. The merry-andrew saw them enter the cloak-room to fetch their cloaks; and in a few minutes they left the house. "I have nothing more to do here," he murmured; "I may as well go too."

Completely covering his dress with an ample overcoat, he started for home, thinking the cold frosty air would cool his confused brain. He lit a cigar and, walking up the Rue St. Lazare, crossed the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and struck into the Faubourg Montmartre. A man suddenly darted out from some place of concealment, and rushed upon him with a dagger. Fortunately the merry-andrew had a cat-like instinct, which enabled him to protect himself against immediate danger, and detect any harm which threatened. He saw, or rather divined, the man crouching in the dark shadow of a house, and had the presence of mind to step back and spread out his arms before him, and so ward off the would-be assassin. This movement certainly saved his life, for he received in the arm a furious stab, which would have instantly killed him had it penetrated his breast. Anger, more than pain, made him exclaim: "Ah, you villain!" and recoiling a few feet, he put himself on the defensive. The precaution, however, was useless; for seeing his blow miss the mark, the assassin did not return to the attack, but made rapidly off.

"That was certainly De Lagors," thought the merry-andrew, "and De Clameran must be somewhere near. While I walked round one side of the church, they must have gone the other and lain in wait for me."

His wound began to pain him very much, and he stood under a gas-lamp to examine it. It did not appear to be dangerous, although the arm was cut through to the bone. He tore his handkerchief into four bands, and tied his arm up with them with the dexterity of a surgeon. "I must be on the track of some great crime," said he, "since these fellows are resolved upon murder. When such cunning rogues are only in danger of the police court, they do not gratuitously risk the chance of being tried for murder." He thought that by enduring a great deal of pain he might still use his arm, so he started in pursuit of his

enemy, taking care to keep in the middle of the road, and to avoid all dark corners. Although he saw no one, he was convinced that he was being followed. He was not mistaken. When he reached the Boulevard Montmartre, he crossed the street, and, as he did so, distinguished two shadows which he recognized. They also crossed the street a little higher up.

"I have to deal with desperate men," he muttered. "They do not even take the pains to conceal their pursuit of me. They seem to be accustomed to this kind of adventure, and the carriage trick which fooled Fanferlot would never succeed with them. Besides, my light hat is a perfect beacon to lead them on in the night." He continued his way up the boulevard, and, without turning his head, felt sure that his enemies were not more than thirty paces behind him. "I must get rid of them somehow," he said to himself. "I can neither return home nor to the Grand Archangel with these devils at my heels. They are following me now to find out where I live, and who I am. If they discover the merry-andrew is M. Verduret, and that M. Verduret is M. Lecoq, my plans will be ruined. They will escape abroad with the money, and I shall be left to console myself with a wounded arm. A pleasant ending to all my exertions!"

The idea of Raoul and De Clameran escaping him so exasperated him that for an instant he thought of having them arrested at once. This was easy enough, for he only had to rush upon them, shout for help, and they would all three be arrested, conducted to the police station and brought before the commissary. The police often resort to this ingenious and simple means to arrest a criminal whom they may meet by chance, and whom they can not seize without a warrant. The merry-andrew had sufficient proof to sustain him in the arrest of De Lagors. He could produce the letter and the mutilated prayer-book, he could reveal the existence of the pawnbroker's tickets in the house at Vésinet, he could show his wounded arm. He could, if necessary, force Raoul to confess how and why he had assumed the name of De Lagors, and what his motive was in passing himself off as a relative of M. Fauvel. On the other hand, in acting thus hastily, he would be, perhaps, insuring the safety of the principal plotter, De Clameran. What absolute proofs had he against him? Not one. He had strong suspicions, but no real grounds for making any charge. On reflection, the detective decided that he would act alone, as

he had thus far done, and that alone and unaided he would discover the truth of his suspicions.

Having arrived at this decision, the first step to be taken was to put his pursuers on the wrong scent. He walked rapidly along the Boulevard Sébastopol, and, reaching the square of the Arts et Métiers, he abruptly stopped, and asked some insignificant questions of two policemen, who were standing talking together. This maneuvre had the result he expected; Raoul and De Clameran stood perfectly still about twenty steps off, not daring to advance. While talking with the constables, the merry-andrew pulled the bell of the door before which they were standing, and the sound that ensued apprised him that the door was open. He bowed, and entered the house.

A minute later the constables had passed on, and De Lagors and De Clameran in their turn rang the bell. When the door was opened, they roused up the concierge and asked who it was that had just gone in disguised as a merry-andrew. They were told that he had seen no such person, and that none of the lodgers had gone out in fancy costume that night. "However," added the man, "I am not perfectly sure, for this house has another door which opens on the Rue St. Denis."

"We are tricked," interrupted De Lagors, "and will never know who this merry-andrew is."

"Unless we learn it too soon for our own advantage," said De Clameran musingly.

While the pair were lamenting their failure in discovering the merry-andrew's identity, Verduret hurried along and reached the Grand Archangel as the clock struck three. Prosper, who was watching from his window, saw him in the distance, and ran down to open the door for him. "What have you learned?" he asked: "What did you find out? Did you see Madeleine? Were Raoul and De Clameran at the ball?"

But M. Verduret was not in the habit of discussing private affairs where he might be overheard. "First of all, let us go into your room," said he, "and then get me some water to wash this cut, which burns like fire."

"Heavens! Are you wounded?"

"Yes, it is a little souvenir of your friend Raoul. Ah, I will soon teach him the danger of scratching my skin!" Prosper was surprised at the look of merciless rage on his friend's face, as he calmly washed and dressed his arm. "Now, Prosper, we will talk as much as you please," resumed M. Verduret. "Our

enemies are on the alert, and we must crush them instantly. I have made a mistake. I have been on the wrong track; it is an accident liable to happen to any man, no matter how intelligent he may be. I took the effect for the cause. The day I was convinced that culpable relations existed between Raoul and Madame Fauvel, I thought I held the end of the thread that would lead us to the truth. I ought to have been more mistrustful; this solution was too simple, too natural."

"Do you suppose Madame Fauvel to be innocent?"

"Certainly not; but her guilt is not such as I first supposed. I imagined that, infatuated with a seductive young adventurer, Madame Fauvel had bestowed upon him the name of one of her relatives, and then introduced him to her husband as her nephew. This was an adroit stratagem to gain him admission to the house. She began by giving him all the money she could dispose of; then she let him have her jewels to pawn; and at length having nothing more to give, she allowed him to steal the money from her husband's safe. That is what I first thought."

"And in this way everything was explained?"

"No, this did not explain everything, as I well knew at the time, and should, consequently, have studied my characters more thoroughly. How is De Clameran's ascendency to be accounted for, if my first idea was the correct one?"

"De Clameran is De Lagors's accomplice, of course."

"Ah, there is the mistake! I for a long time believed De Lagors to be the person principally concerned, whereas, in fact, he is nothing. Yesterday, in a dispute between them, the forge-master said to him: 'And, above all, my young friend, I would advise you not to resist me, for if you do I will crush you to atoms.' That explains all. The elegant De Lagors is not Madame Fauvel's lover, but De Clameran's tool. Besides, did our first suppositions account for Madeleine's resigned obedience? It is De Clameran, and not De Lagors, whom she obeys."

Prosper began to remonstrate. M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders. To convince him he had only to tell him that three hours ago De Clameran had announced his approaching marriage with Madeleine; but he refrained from doing so. "De Clameran," he continued, "De Clameran alone has Madame Fauvel in his power. Now, the question is, what is the secret of this terrible influence he has gained over her? I have posi-

tive proof that they have not met since their early youth until fifteen months ago; and, as Madame Fauvel's reputation has always been above the reach of slander, we must seek in the past for the cause of her resigned obedience to his will."

"We shall never discover it," said Prosper mournfully.

"We shall know it as soon as we have learned the history of De Clameran's past life. Ah, to-night he turned as white as a sheet when I mentioned his brother Gaston's name. And then I remembered that Gaston died suddenly, while his brother Louis was on a visit to him."

"Do you think he was murdered?"

"I think the men who tried to assassinate me would do anything. The robbery, my friend, has now become a secondary affair. It is easily explained, and, if that were all that had to be accounted for, I would say to you: 'My task is done, let us go and ask the investigating magistrate for a warrant of arrest.'"

Prosper started up with sparkling eyes, and exclaimed: "What, you know then—is it possible?"

"Yes, I know who gave the key, and I know who told the secret word."

"The key may have been M. Fauvel's. But the word—"

"The word, unlucky man, you gave yourself. You have forgotten, I suppose. But, fortunately, Nina remembered. You know that a couple of days before the robbery, you took De Lagors and two other friends to sup with Madame Gipsy? Nina was sad, and reproached you for not being more devoted to her."

"Yes, I remember that."

"But do you remember what you replied to her?"

"No, I do not," said Prosper, after thinking a moment.

"Well, I will tell you; you said: 'Nina, you are unjust in reproaching me with not thinking constantly of you, for at this very moment it is your dear name that guards my employer's safe.'"

The truth suddenly burst upon Prosper like a thunderclap. He wrung his hands despairingly and exclaimed: "Yes, oh, yes! I remember now."

"Then you can easily understand the rest. One of the scoundrels went to Madame Fauvel, and compelled her to give up her husband's key; then, at a venture, he placed the movable buttons on the name of Gipsy, opened the safe, and took from

it the three hundred and fifty thousand francs. And Madame Fauvel must have been terribly frightened before she yielded. The day after the robbery the poor woman was near dying; and it was she who at the greatest risk sent you the ten thousand francs."

"But who was the thief, Raoul or De Clameran? What enables them to thus tyrannize over Madame Fauvel? And how does Madeleine come to be mixed up in this disgraceful affair?"

"These questions, my dear Prosper, I can not yet answer; therefore I postpone going to see the magistrate. I must ask you to wait ten days; and, if in that time I can not discover the solution of this mystery, I will return and we will go together to M. Patrigent."

"Are you then going away?"

"In an hour I shall be on the road to Beaucaire. It was from that neighborhood that De Clameran came, as well as Madame Fauvel, who was a Mademoiselle de la Verberie before her marriage."

"Yes, I have heard of both families."

"I must go there to study them. Neither Raoul nor De Clameran can escape during my absence. The police will not lose sight of them. But you, Prosper, must be prudent. Promise me to remain a prisoner here while I am away."

All that M. Verduret asked, Prosper willingly promised. But he could not let him depart thus. "Will you not tell me, sir," he asked, "who you are, and your reasons for coming to my assistance?"

M. Verduret smiled sadly, and replied: "I will tell you in the presence of Nina, on the day before your marriage with Madeleine takes place."

Once left to his own reflection, Prosper began to appreciate the powerful assistance rendered him by his friend. Recalling the field of investigation gone over by his mysterious acquaintance, he was amazed at its extent. How many facts had been discovered in a week, and with what precision, too, although he had stated he was on the wrong track! Verduret had grouped his evidence, and reached a result which Prosper felt he never could have hoped to have attained by his own exertions. He was conscious that he possessed neither M. Verduret's penetration nor his subtlety, still less the art of exacting obedience, of creating friends at every step, and of making men and circumstances conduce to the attainment of a common

result. He soon began to regret the absence of this friend, who had risen up in the hour of adversity. He missed the sometimes rough but always kindly voice, which had encouraged and consoled him. He felt wofully lost and helpless, not daring to act or think for himself, more timid than a child when deserted by its nurse. He had at least the good sense to follow the recommendations of his mentor. He remained shut up at the Grand Archangel, not even showing himself at the windows. Twice he had news of M. Verduret. The first time he received a letter in which this friend said he had seen his father, and had a long talk with him. Afterward, Dubois, M. de Clameran's valet, came to tell him that his "chief" reported everything as progressing finely. On the ninth day of his voluntary seclusion, Prosper began to feel restless, and at ten o'clock at night wished to go for a walk, thinking the fresh air would relieve the headache which had kept him awake the previous night. Madame Alexandre, who seemed to have some knowledge of M. Verduret's affairs, begged Prosper to remain at home.

"What do I risk by taking a walk at this hour, in a quiet part of the city?" he asked. "I can certainly stroll as far as the Jardin des Plantes without the chance of meeting any one."

Unfortunately he did not strictly follow this programme; for, having reached the Orleans railway station, he went into a cafe near by, and called for a glass of beer. As he sat drinking it, he glanced at a daily paper, "Le Soleil," and under the heading of "Rumors of the Day," read the following paragraph: "We understand that the niece of one of our most prominent bankers, M. Andre Fauvel, will be shortly married to the Marquis Louis de Clameran, a Provencal nobleman." This news, coming upon him so unexpectedly, proved to Prosper the justness of M. Verduret's calculations. Alas! why did not this certainty inspire him with absolute faith? Why did it not give him the courage to wait, the strength of mind to refrain from acting on his own responsibility? Frenzied by distress of mind, he already saw Madeleine indissolubly united to this villain, and, thinking that M. Verduret would perhaps arrive too late to be of use, determined at all risks to throw an obstacle in the way of the marriage. He called for pen and paper, and, forgetting that no situation can excuse the mean cowardice of an anonymous letter, wrote in a disguised hand the following lines to M. Fauvel:

"Dear Sir—You consigned your cashier to prison; you acted rightly, since you were convinced of his dishonesty and faithlessness. But, even if he stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs from your safe, does it follow that he also stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds, and took them to the pawnbroker's, where they now are? Warned as you are, were I you, I would not be the subject of public scandal, but I would watch my wife, and would soon discover that one should ever be distrustful of handsome cousins. Moreover, before signing Mademoiselle Madeleine's marriage contract, I would call at the Prefecture of Police, and obtain some information concerning the noble Marquis de Clameran.—A Friend."

Prosper hastened off to post his letter. Fearing that it would not reach M. Fauvel in time, he walked to one of the head offices in the Rue Cardinal Lemoine, and put it into the letter-box. Until this moment he had not doubted the propriety of his action. But now, when too late, when he heard the sound of his letter falling into the box, a thousand scruples filled his mind. Was it not wrong to act thus hurriedly? Would not this letter interfere with all M. Verduret's plans? Upon reaching the hotel, his doubts were changed into bitter regrets. Joseph Dubois was waiting for him; he had received a telegram from his chief saying that his business was finished, and that he would return the next evening at nine o'clock. Prosper was wretched. He would have given all he had to recover the anonymous letter. And he had cause for regret. For at that very hour M. Verduret was taking his seat in the train at Tarascon, and meditating upon the most advantageous plan to be adopted in pursuance of his discoveries. For he had discovered everything.

Adding to what he already knew the story of an old servant of Mademoiselle de la Verberie, the affidavit of an old footman who had always lived in the De Clameran family, and the depositions of the married couple in the service of De Lagors at his Vesinet country-house, the latter having been sent to him by Dubois (Fanferlot), with a good deal of information obtained from the Prefecture of Police, he had worked up a complete case, and could now act upon a chain of evidence without a missing link. As he had predicted, he had been compelled to search into the distant past for the first causes of the crime of which Prosper had been the victim. The following is the

drama, as written out by him for the benefit of the examining magistrate with the certainty that it contained sufficient grounds for preferring an indictment.

XII

ABOUT six miles from Tarascon, on the left bank of the Rhone, not far from Messrs. Audibert's wonderful gardens, stood the chateau of Clameran, a weather-stained, neglected, but massive structure. Here lived, in 1841, the old Marquis de Clameran and his two sons, Gaston and Louis. The marquis was an eccentric old man. He belonged to the race of nobles, now almost extinct, whose watches stopped in 1789, and who keep the time of a past century. More attached to his illusions than to his life, the old marquis insisted upon considering all the stirring events which had happened since the first revolution as a series of deplorable practical jokes. Emigrating in the suite of the Comte d'Artois, he did not return to France until 1815, with the allies. He should have been thankful to heaven for the recovery of a portion of his immense family estates; a comparatively small portion, it is true, but still sufficient to support him honorably. He said, however, that he did not think the few paltry acres worth thanking heaven for. At first he tried every means to obtain an appointment at court; but, finding all his efforts fail, he resolved to retire to his chateau, which he did, after cursing and pitying his king, whom he worshiped, and whom, at the bottom of his heart, he regarded as a thorough Jacobin.

The Marquis de Clameran soon became accustomed to the free and indolent life of a country nobleman. Possessing about fifteen thousand francs a year, he spent twenty-five or thirty thousand, borrowing even on his estates, on the pretense that a genuine Restoration would soon take place, and that he would then regain possession of all his properties. Following his example, his younger son, Louis, lived extravagantly, and was always in pursuit of adventure, or idling away his time in drinking and gambling. The elder son, Gaston, anxious to par-

ticipate in the stirring events of the time, studied hard, and read certain papers and pamphlets surreptitiously received, the mere titles of which were regarded by his father as blasphemous. Altogether the old marquis was the happiest of mortals, eating and drinking well, hunting a good deal, tolerated by the peasants, and execrated by the neighboring townspeople, whom he treated with contempt and raillery. Time never hung heavy on his hands, excepting in the summer, when the valley of the Rhone was intensely hot; but even then he had infallible means of amusement ever fresh, though always the same. It was to speak ill of his daughter, the Comtesse de la Verberie.

The Comtesse de la Verberie, the marquis's special aversion, was a tall, wiry woman, angular in character, as well as in appearance, cold and arrogant toward her equals, and domineering over her inferiors. Like her noble neighbor, she had emigrated with her husband; who was afterward killed at Lutzen, but, unfortunately for his memory, not in the French ranks. In 1815 the comtesse also came back to France. But while the Marquis de Clameran returned to comparative ease, she could obtain nothing from royal munificence but the small estate and chateau of La Verberie, and a pension of two thousand five hundred francs. The comtesse had but one child, a lovely girl of eighteen, named Valentine, fair, slender, and graceful, with large, soft eyes, beautiful enough to make the stone saints of the village church thrill in their niches when she knelt piously at their feet. The renown of her great beauty, carried along on the rapid waters of the Rhone, had spread far and wide. Often the boatmen and the robust drivers urging their powerful horses along the towpath would stop to gaze with admiration upon Valentine, seated under some grand old trees on the bank of the river, absorbed in a book. At a distance, in her white dress and flowing tresses, she seemed to these honest people a mysterious spirit from another world, and they regarded it as a good omen when they caught a glimpse of her. All along between Arles and Valence she was spoken of as the "lovely fairy" of La Verberie.

If M. de Clameran detested the comtesse, Madame de la Verberie execrated the marquis. If he nicknamed her "the witch," she retaliated by calling him "the old gander." And yet they ought to have agreed, for at heart they cherished the same opinions, though viewing them in different ways. The marquis considered himself a philosopher, scoffed at every-

thing, and had an excellent digestion. The comtesse nursed her old grievances, and grew sallow and thin from rage and envy. Still, they might have spent many pleasant evenings together, for, after all, they were neighbors. From Clameran could be seen Valentine's greyhound running about the park of La Verberie; from La Verberie glimpses were had of the lights in the dining-room windows of Clameran. And, regularly as these lights were discerned every evening, the comtesse would say in a spiteful tone: "Ah, now their orgies are about to commence!" The two chateaux were only separated by the fast-flowing Rhone, which at this spot was rather narrow. But between the two families existed a hatred deeper and more difficult to avert than even the river's course. What was the cause of this hatred? The comtesse, no less than the marquis, would have found it difficult to tell. It was related that under the reign of Henri IV, or Louis XIII, a La Verberie had seduced a fair daughter of the De Clamerans. The misdeed in question led to a duel; swords flashed in the sunlight, and blood stained the fresh green grass. This groundwork of facts had been highly embellished by fiction; handed down from generation to generation, it became a long tragic history of perfidy, murder, and rapine, precluding any intercourse between the two families.

The usual result followed, as it always does in real life, and often in romances, which, however exaggerated they may be, generally preserve a reflection of the truth which inspires them. Gaston met Valentine at an entertainment, and fell in love with her at first sight. Valentine saw Gaston, and from that moment his image filled her heart. But so many obstacles separated them! For more than a year they both religiously guarded their secret, buried like a treasure in the inmost recesses of their hearts. This year of charming, dangerous reveries decided their fate. To the sweetness of their first impressions a more tender sentiment succeeded; then came love, each of them endowing the other with superhuman qualities and ideal perfections. Deep, sincere passion expands only in solitude; in the impure air of a city it fades and dies, like the hardy plants of the south, which lose their color and perfume when transplanted into our hot-houses. Gaston and Valentine had only seen each other once, but seeing was to love; and, as the time passed, their love grew stronger, until at last the fatality which had presided over their first meeting brought

them once more together. They chanced to be visiting at the same time the old Duchesse d'Arlange, who had recently returned to the neighborhood to dispose of her remaining property. They spoke to each other, and, like old friends, surprised to find that they entertained the same thoughts and echoed the same memories. Again they were separated for months. But ere long, as if by accident, both chanced to be regularly on the banks of the Rhone at a certain hour, when they would sit and gaze across the river at each other. Finally, one mild May evening, when Madame de la Verberie had gone to Beaucaire, Gaston ventured into the park, and presented himself before Valentine. She was neither surprised nor indignant. Genuine innocence displays none of the startled modesty assumed by its conventional counterfeit. It never occurred to Valentine to bid Gaston to leave her. She leaned upon his arm, and strolled up and down the grand old avenue of oaks with him. They did not say they loved each other, they felt it; but they did say with tears in their eyes that their love was hopeless. They well knew that the inveterate family feud could never be overcome, and that the attempt would be mere folly. They swore never, never to forget each other, and mournfully resolved never to meet again, excepting just once more!

Alas! Valentine was not without excuse. Possessed of a timid, loving heart, her expansive affection had always been repressed and chilled by a harsh mother. Never had there been one of those long private talks between the Comtesse de la Verberie and Valentine which enables a good mother to read her daughter's heart like an open book. Madame de la Verberie concerned herself only with her daughter's beauty. She was wont to think: "Next winter I will borrow enough to take the child to Paris, and I am much mistaken if her handsome looks do not win her a rich husband and release me from this wretched state of poverty." She considered this loving her daughter! The second meeting of the lovers was not the last. Gaston dared not trust a boatman, so that he had to walk a league in order to cross the bridge. He thought it would be shorter work to swim the river; but he could not swim well, and to cross the Rhone where it ran so rapidly was a rash proceeding even for the most skilful swimmer.

However, he practised privately, and to such good purpose that one evening Valentine was startled by seeing him rise

out of the water at her feet. She made him promise never to attempt this exploit again. Still he repeated the feat and the promise the next and every successive evening. As Valentine was always imagining he was being drowned in the furious current, they agreed upon a signal to relieve her anxiety. At the moment of starting, Gaston would place a light in his window at Clameran, and in a quarter of an hour he would be at his idol's feet.

What were the projects and hopes of the lovers? Alas! they had no projects, and they hoped for nothing. Blindly, thoughtlessly, almost fearlessly, they abandoned themselves to the dangerous happiness of a daily meeting. Regardless of the storm that threatened to burst over their heads, they reveled in their present happiness. Is it not like this with every sincere passion? Love subsists upon itself and in itself; and the very things which ought to extinguish it, absence and obstacles, only cause it to burn more fiercely. It is exclusive and troubled neither with the past nor the future; it sees and cares for nothing beyond its present enjoyment. Moreover, Valentine and Gaston believed every one ignorant of their secret. They had always been so exceedingly cautious! they had kept such a strict watch! They flattered themselves that their conduct had been a masterpiece of dissimulation and prudence. Valentine had fixed upon a time for their meetings when she was certain her mother would not miss her. Gaston had never confided his secret to any one, not even to his brother Louis. They never mentioned each other's name. They denied themselves a last sweet word, a final kiss, when they felt these would be attended with danger. Poor blind lovers! As if anything could be concealed from the idle curiosity of country gossips; from the slanderous spirits ever on the lookout for some new bit of scandal, on which they improve and eagerly spread far and near. They believed their secret well kept, whereas it had long since been a matter of public notoriety; the story of their love, the particulars of their meetings, were topics of conversation throughout the neighborhood. Sometimes at dusk they would see a boat gliding through the water, close to the shore, and would say to each other: "It is a belated fisherman returning home." They were mistaken. On board the boat were spies, who, delighted at having discovered them, hastened to report, with a number of false details, the result of their shameful expedition.

One dreary November evening, Gaston was awakened to the true state of affairs. The Rhone was so swollen by heavy rains that an inundation was daily expected. To attempt to swim across this impetuous torrent would be tempting Providence. Gaston therefore went to Tarascon, intending to cross the bridge there, and to walk along the bank to the usual place of meeting at La Verberie, where Valentine expected him at eleven o'clock. Whenever Gaston went to Tarascon, he dined with a relative living there; but on this occasion a strange fatality led him to accompany a friend to the Hotel of the Three Emperors. After dinner, instead of going to the Cafe Simon, their usual resort, they went to the little cafe facing the open space where the fairs are held. They found the small apartment crowded with young men of the town. Gaston and his friend called for a bottle of beer, and commenced a game at billiards. After they had been playing for a short time, Gaston's attention was attracted by peals of forced laughter from a party at the other end of the room. From this moment, with his attention taken up by this continued laughter, of which he believed himself the object, he knocked the balls about recklessly. His conduct surprised his friend, who remarked to him: "Why, what is the matter? You are missing the simplest strokes."

"It is nothing."

The game continued a little while longer, when Gaston suddenly turned as white as a sheet, and, throwing down his cue, strode toward the table which was occupied by five young men, playing dominoes and drinking mulled wine. He addressed the elder of the group, a handsome man of twenty-six, with large bright eyes, and a fierce black mustache, named Jules Lazet. "Repeat, if you dare," he said, in a voice trembling with passion, "the remark you just now made!"

"Who would prevent me?" asked Lazet calmly. "I said, and I repeat, that a nobleman's daughter is no better than a workman's daughter; that virtue does not necessarily accompany a title."

"You mentioned a particular name!"

Lazet rose from his chair as if he knew his answer would exasperate Gaston, and that from words they would come to blows. "I did," he said, with an insolent smile. "I mentioned the name of the pretty little fairy of La Verberie."

At this all the young men, and even a couple of commercial

travelers who were dining at the cafe, rose and surrounded the two disputants. The provoking looks, the murmurs, the shouts, which were directed toward Gaston as he walked up to Lazet, convinced him that he was surrounded by enemies. The wickedness and the evil tongue of the old marquis were bearing their fruit. Rancor ferments quickly and fiercely in the hearts and heads of the people of Provence. But Gaston de Clameran was not a man to withdraw, even if his foes were a hundred, instead of fifteen or twenty.

"No one but a coward," he said, in a clear, ringing voice, which the pervading silence rendered almost startling; "no one but a contemptible coward would be base enough to calumniate a young girl who has neither father nor brother to defend her honor."

"If she has no father or brother," sneered Lazet, "she has her lovers, and that suffices."

The insulting words, "her lovers," enraged Gaston beyond control; he struck Lazet violently in the face. Every one in the cafe simultaneously uttered a cry of alarm. Lazet's violence of character, his herculean strength and undaunted courage, were well known. He sprang over the table that separated him from Gaston, and seized him by the throat. Then arose a scene of excitement and confusion. De Clameran's friend, attempting to assist him, was knocked down with billiard-cues, and kicked under a table. Equally strong and agile, Gaston and Lazet struggled for some minutes without either gaining an advantage. Lazet, as loyal as he was courageous, would not accept assistance from his friends. He continually called out: "Keep away; let me fight it out alone!"

But the others were too excited to remain inactive spectators of the scene. "A blanket, quick!" cried one of them; "a blanket to toss the marquis!"

Five or six young men now rushed upon Gaston, and separated him from Lazet. Some tried to throw him down, others to trip him up. He defended himself with the energy of despair, exhibiting in his furious struggles a strength of which no one would have thought him capable. He struck right and left as he showered fierce epithets upon his adversaries, who were twelve against one. He was endeavoring to get round the billiard-table so as to be near the door, and had almost succeeded, when an exultant cry arose: "Here is the blanket!"

"Put him in the blanket—the little fairy's lover!"

Gaston heard these cries. He saw himself overcome, and suffering an ignoble outrage at the hands of these enraged men. By a dexterous movement he extricated himself from the grasp of the three who were holding him, and felled a fourth to the ground. His arms were free; but all his enemies returned to the charge. Then he seemed to lose his head, and seizing a knife which lay on the table where the commercial travelers had been dining, he plunged it twice into the breast of the first man who rushed upon him. This unfortunate man was Jules Lazet. He dropped to the ground. There was a second of silent horror. Then four or five of the young men rushed forward to raise Lazet. The landlady ran about wringing her hands, and screaming with fright. Some of the younger assailants rushed into the streets shouting: "Murder! Murder!" But all the others turned upon Gaston with cries of vengeance. He felt that he was lost. His enemies seized the first objects they could lay their hands upon and he received several wounds. He jumped upon the billiard-table, and making a rapid spring, dashed at the large window of the cafe. He was fearfully cut by the broken glass and splinters, but he passed through.

Gaston was outside, but he was not yet saved. Astonished and disconcerted at his desperate feat, his assailants for a moment were stupefied; but recovering their presence of mind, they started in pursuit of him. Gaston ran on from tree to tree, making frequent turnings. Finally he determined, if possible, to reach Clameran. With incredible rapidity he darted diagonally across the open space, in the direction of the embankment which protects the valley of Tarascon from inundations. Unfortunately, upon reaching this embankment, Gaston forgot that the entrance was partially closed by three posts, such as are always placed before walks intended for foot-passengers only, and rushed against one of them with such violence that he was thrown back and badly bruised. He quickly sprang up; but his pursuers were upon him. This time he could expect no mercy. The infuriated men at his heels yelled: "To the Rhone with him! To the Rhone with the marquis!"

His forehead was cut, and the blood trickled from the wound into his eyes, and blinded him. He must escape, or die in the attempt. He had tightly clasped the bloody knife with which he had stabbed Lazet. He struck his nearest foe; the man fell to the ground with a heavy groan. This blow gained him a moment's respite, which gave him time to pass between the

posts, and rush along the embankment. Two men remained kneeling over their wounded companion, and five others resumed the pursuit. But Gaston ran fast, for the horror of his situation tripled his energy. With elbows kept tight to his sides, and holding his breath, he went along at such a speed that he soon distanced his pursuers. Gaston ran on for another mile, and only when he knew he was safe from capture sank down at the foot of a tree to rest. Only forty minutes had elapsed since Gaston and his friend entered the cafe. These forty minutes had given him more cause for sorrow and remorse than the whole of his previous life put together. He had killed a man, and still convulsively held the murderous instrument; he cast it from him with horror. He tried to account for the dreadful circumstances which had just taken place. If he alone had been lost! But Valentine was dragged down with him; her reputation was gone. And it was his want of self-command which had cast to the winds this honor, confided to his keeping, and which he held far dearer than his own.

But he could not remain here bewailing his misfortune. The authorities must soon be on his track. They would certainly go to the chateau of Clameran to seek him. He started to walk, but with great pain, for the reaction had come, and his nerves and muscles, so violently strained, had now begun to relax. His hip and shoulder pained him almost beyond endurance. The cut on his forehead had almost stopped bleeding, but the coagulated blood round his eyes nearly blinded him. After a painful walk he reached home at ten o'clock. The old valet who admitted him started back terrified. "Good heavens, sir! what is the matter?"—"Silence!" said Gaston in the brief, compressed tone always inspired by imminent danger, "silence! Where is my father?"—"The marquis is in his room with M. Louis. He has had a sudden attack of the gout, and can not put his foot to the ground; but you, sir—" Gaston did not stop to listen further. He hurried to his father's room. The old marquis, who was playing backgammon with Louis, dropped his dice-box with a cry of horror, when he looked up and saw his eldest son standing before him covered with blood. "What is the matter? what have you been doing, Gaston?" he exclaimed.

"I have come to embrace you for the last time, father, and to ask for assistance to escape abroad."—"You wish to fly?"—"I must, father, and instantly; I am pursued, the gendarmes may be here at any moment. I have killed two men."

The marquis was so shocked that he forgot the gout, and attempted to rise; a violent twinge made him drop back into his chair. "Where? When?" he gasped.—"At Tarascon, in a cafe, an hour ago; fifteen men attacked me, and I seized a knife to defend myself."—"The old tricks of '93," said the marquis. "Did they insult you, Gaston?"—"They insulted in my presence the name of a noble young girl."—"And you punished the rascals? By heaven! you did well. But who was the lady you defended?"

"Mademoiselle Valentine de la Verberie."

"What!" cried the marquis, "what! the daughter of that old witch! Those accursed La Verberies have always brought misfortune upon us." He certainly abominated the comtesse; but his respect for her noble blood was greater than his resentment toward her individuality, and he added: "Nevertheless, Gaston, you did your duty."

Meanwhile, the curiosity of Jean, the marquis's old valet, made him venture to open the door, and ask: "Did Monsieur the Marquis ring?"—"No, you rascal," answered M. de Clameran, "you know very well I did not. But now you are here, be useful. Quickly bring some clothes for M. Gaston, some clean linen, and some warm water: everything necessary to dress his wounds."

These orders were promptly executed, and Gaston found he was not so badly hurt as he had thought. With the exception of a deep stab in his left shoulder, his wounds were not serious. The marquis made a sign to the servants to leave the room. "Do you still think you ought to leave France?" he asked Gaston.—"Yes, father."—"My brother ought not to hesitate," interposed Louis; "he will be arrested here, thrown into prison, vilified in court, and—who knows?"—"We all know well enough that he will be convicted," grumbled the old marquis. "These are the benefits of the immortal Revolution, as it is called."

"There is no time to lose," observed Louis.—"True," said the marquis, "but to fly, to go abroad, one must have money; and I have none by me to give to him."—"Father!"—"No, I have none. Ah, what a prodigal old fool I have been! Have I even a hundred louis?" Then he told Louis to open the secretary. The drawer in which the money was kept contained only nine hundred and twenty francs in gold. "Nine hundred and twenty francs," cried the marquis; "it is not enough. The

eldest son of our house can not fly the country with this paltry sum."

He sat lost in reflection. Suddenly his brow cleared, and he told Louis to open a secret drawer in the secretary, and bring him a small casket. Then the marquis took from his neck a black ribbon, to which was attached the key of the casket. His sons observed with what deep emotion he unlocked it, and slowly took out a necklace, a cross, several rings, and various other jewels. His countenance assumed a solemn expression. "Gaston, my dear son," he said, "at a time like this your life may depend upon bought assistance; money is power." —"I am young, father, and have courage."—"Listen to me. These jewels belonged to your sainted mother, a noble woman, who is now in heaven watching over us. They have never left me. During my days of misery and want, when I was compelled to earn a livelihood by teaching music in London, I piously treasured them. I never thought of selling them; and to pawn them, in the hour of direst need, would have seemed to me a sacrilege. But now, take them, my son, and sell them; they will fetch twenty thousand francs."—"No, my father, no, I can not take them!"—"You must, Gaston. If your mother were on earth, she would tell you to take them, as I do now. I command you to take and use them. The safety, the honor, of the heir of the house of De Clameran must not be imperiled for want of a little gold."

With tearful eyes, Gaston sank on his knees, and, carrying his father's hand to his lips, murmured: "Thanks, father, thanks! In my heedless, ungrateful presumption I have hitherto misjudged you. I did not know your noble character. Forgive me. I accept; but I take them as a sacred deposit, confided to my honor, and for which I will some day account to you."

In their emotion, the marquis and Gaston forgot the threatened danger. But Louis was not touched by the affecting scene. "Time presses," he said: "you had better hasten."—"He is right," cried the marquis; "go, Gaston, go, my son; and Heaven protect the heir of the De Clamerans!" Gaston slowly got up, and said with an embarrassed air: "Before leaving you, father, I must fulfil a sacred duty. I have not told you everything. I love Valentine, the young girl whose honor I defended this evening."—"Oh!" cried the marquis, thunderstruck, "oh, oh!" —"And I entreat you, father, to ask Madame de la Verberie

for her daughter's hand. Valentine will gladly join me abroad, and share my exile."

Gaston stopped, frightened at the effect of his words. The old marquis had become crimson, or rather purple, as if struck by apoplexy. "Preposterous!" he gasped. "Impossible! Perfect folly!"—"I love her, father, and have promised her never to marry another."—"Then you will remain a bachelor."—"I shall marry her!" cried Gaston excitedly. "I shall marry her because I have sworn I would, and I will not be so base as to desert her."—"Nonsense!"—"I tell you Mademoiselle de la Verberie must and shall be my wife. It is too late for me to draw back. Even if I no longer loved her, I would still marry her, because she has given herself to me; because, can't you understand? what was said at the cafe to-night was true: Valentine is my mistress."

Gaston's confession, forced from him by circumstances, produced a very different impression from that which he had expected. The enraged marquis instantly became cool, and his mind seemed relieved of an immense weight. A wicked joy sparkled in his eyes, as he replied: "I congratulate you, Gaston."

"Sir!" interrupted Gaston indignantly; "I have told you that I love her, and have promised to marry her. You seem to forget."—"Ta, ta, ta!" cried the marquis, "your scruples are absurd. You know full well that one of her ancestors led one of our girls astray. Now we are quits! And so she is your mistress—"

"I swear by my mother's memory that Valentine shall be my wife!"—"Do you dare assume that tone toward me?" cried the exasperated marquis. "Never, understand me clearly, never will I give my consent. You know how dear to me is the honor of our house. Well, I would rather see you tried for murder, and even condemned, than married to this hussy!"

This last word was too much for Gaston. "Then your wish shall be gratified, sir. I will remain here, and be arrested. I care not what becomes of me! What is life to me without the hope of Valentine? Take back these jewels; they are useless now."

A terrible scene would have ensued between the father and son had they not been interrupted by a domestic who rushed into the room, and excitedly exclaimed: "The gendarmes! here are the gendarmes!" At this news the old marquis started up, and seemed to forget his gout, which had yielded to more vio-

lent emotions. "Gendarmes!" he cried, "in my house, at Clameran! They shall pay dear for their insolence! You will help me, will you not, my men?"—"Yes, yes," answered the servants. "Down with the gendarmes! down with them!"

Fortunately, Louis, during all this excitement, preserved his presence of mind. "To resist would be folly," he said. "Even if we repulsed the gendarmes to-night, they would return to-morrow with reenforcements."—"Louis is right," said the marquis bitterly. "Might is right, as they said in '93. The gendarmes are all-powerful. Do they not even have the impertinence to come up to me while I am out shooting, and ask to see my license?—I, a De Clameran, show a license!"

"Where are they?" asked Louis of the servants.

"At the outer gate," answered La Verdure, one of the grooms. "Do you not hear the noise they are making with their sabres, sir?"—"Then Gaston must escape by the garden door."—"It is guarded, sir," said La Verdure in despair, "and the little gate in the park also. There seems to be a regiment of them. They are even stationed along the park walls."

"Then," said the marquis, "we are surrounded?"—"Not a single chance of escape," groaned Jean.—"We shall see about that!" cried the marquis. "Ah, we are not the strongest, but we can be the most artful. Attention! Louis, my son, you and La Verdure go down to the stables, and mount the fastest horses; then as quietly as possible station yourselves, you, Louis, at the park gate, and you, La Verdure, at the outer gate. You others, go and post yourselves at either of the gates. Upon the signal I shall give by firing off a pistol, let both gates be instantly opened. Louis and La Verdure must spur on their horses, and do all they can to pass through the gendarmes, who are sure to follow in pursuit."

"I will make them run," said La Verdure.

"Listen. During this time, Gaston, aided by Jean, will scale the park wall, and hasten along the river-bank to the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. He is an old sailor, and devoted to our house. He will take Gaston in his boat; and, when they are once on the Rhone, there is nothing to be feared save heaven. Now go, all of you; do as I have said."

Left alone with his son, the old marquis slipped the jewels into a silk purse, and stretching out his arms toward Gaston said, in broken accents: "Come here, my son, and let me bless you." Gaston hesitated. "Come," insisted the old man, "I

must embrace you for the last time. I may never see you again. Save yourself, save your name, Gaston, and then—you know how I love you. Take back these jewels—" For an instant father and son clung to each other, overpowered by emotion. But the continued noise at the gate now reached their ears. "We must part!" said M. de Clameran. And, taking a pair of small pistols, he handed them to his son, and added with averted eyes: "You must not be captured alive, Gaston!"

Unfortunately Gaston did not immediately hasten to the park wall. He yearned more than ever to see Valentine, and he perceived a possibility of being able to bid her farewell. He could persuade Pilorel to stop the boat when they reached the park of La Verberie. He therefore employed the few minutes respite that destiny had allowed him in going to his room and placing in the window the signal that would tell Valentine he was coming; and even waited for an answering light. "Come, M. Gaston," entreated old Jean, who could not understand this strange conduct. "For heaven's sake, make haste! your life is at stake!"

At last he came running down the stairs, and had just reached the hall when a pistol-shot, the signal given by the marquis, resounded through the house. The swinging open of the large gate, the rattling of the sabres of the gendarmes, the furious galloping of many horses, and a chorus of loud shouts and angry oaths, were next heard. Leaning against the window of his room, his brow covered with perspiration, the Marquis de Clameran breathlessly awaited the issue of this expedient, upon which depended the life of his eldest son. His measures were excellent. As he had planned, Louis and La Verdure managed to dash out through the gates, one to the right and the other to the left, each one pursued by a crowd of mounted men. Their horses flew like arrows, and kept far ahead of the pursuers. Gaston was as good as saved, when fate—but was it only fate?—interfered. Suddenly Louis's horse stumbled, and fell to the ground with his rider under him. Immediately surrounded by the gendarmes, M. de Clameran's second son was easily recognized. "He is not the murderer!" cried one of the young men of the town. "Let us hurry back, they are trying to deceive us!"

They returned just in time to see, by the uncertain light of the moon peeping from behind a cloud, Gaston climbing the

wall. "There is our man!" exclaimed a corporal. "Keep your eyes open, and gallop after him!" They spurred their horses, and hastened to the spot where Gaston had jumped from the wall. He found himself in an immense madder-field, and it is well known that this valuable root, having to remain in the ground three years, the furrows are necessarily plowed very deep. Horses cannot gallop over its uneven surface; indeed, they can scarcely stand steadily upon it. This circumstances brought the gendarmes to a dead halt. Jumping from furrow to furrow, Gaston soon left his pursuers far behind, and reached a vast plantation covered with undergrowth. The horsemen urged each other on, and called out every time they saw Gaston running from one clump of trees to another. Being familiar with the country, young De Clameran did not despair. He knew that after the plantation came a field of thistles, and that the two were separated by a wide, deep ditch. He resolved to jump into this ditch, run along the bottom, and climb out at the further end, while the others were still looking for him among the trees. But he had forgotten the rising of the river.

Upon reaching the ditch, he found it full of water. Discouraged but not disconcerted, he was about to jump across, when three horsemen appeared on the opposite side. They were gendarmes who had ridden round the madder-field and the plantation, knowing they would easily make up for lost time on the level ground of the field of thistles. At the sight of these three men, Gaston stood perplexed. He would certainly be captured if he attempted to run through the field, at the end of which he could see the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. To retrace his steps would be to surrender to the hussars. At a little distance on his right was a small wood, but he was separated from it by a road upon which he heard the sound of horses' hoofs. He would certainly be caught there also. On his left was the surging, foaming river. What was to be done? He felt the circle of which he was the centre fast narrowing around him. Must he, then, fall back upon the pistols, and there, in the midst of the country, hunted by gendarmes like a wild beast, blow his brains out? No! He would seize the one chance of salvation left him—the river. Holding a pistol in either hand, he ran to the edge of a little promontory, projecting a few yards into the Rhone. This cape of refuge was formed by the giant trunk of a fallen tree, which swayed

and cracked fearfully under Gaston's weight, as he stood on the further end, and looked back upon his pursuers; there were fifteen of them, some on the right, some on the left, all uttering cries of joy.

"Do you surrender?" called out the corporal of gendarmes. Gaston did not answer; he was weighing his chances. He was above the park of La Verberie; would he be able to swim there, granting that he was not swept away and drowned the instant he plunged into the angry torrent before him? He pictured Valentine, at that very moment, watching, waiting and praying for him on the other shore.

"For the second time do you surrender?" cried the corporal. The unfortunate man did not hear; he was deafened by the waters which were roaring and rushing past him. Although death stared him in the face, Gaston calmly considered which would be the best spot to take his plunge, and commended his soul to God.

"He will stand there until we go after him," said a gendarme; "so we may as well do so at once." But Gaston had finished his prayer. He flung his pistols in the direction of the gendarmes: he was ready. He made the sign of the cross, and then, with outstretched arms, plunged into the Rhone. The violence of his spring loosened the few remaining roots of the old tree; it swayed for a moment, turned over, and then rapidly drifted away. The spectators uttered a cry of horror and pity rather than of anger.

"That is the end of him," muttered one of the gendarmes; "he is done for; a man can't fight against the Rhone; his body will be washed ashore at Arles to-morrow."

The hussars seemed really grieved at the tragic fate of this brave, handsome, young man, whom a moment before they had pursued so tenaciously.

"An ugly piece of work!" grumbled the old sergeant who had command of the hussars.

"Bah!" exclaimed the philosophic corporal, "the Rhone is no worse than the assize-court. Right about, my men. The thing that troubles me is the idea of that poor old man who is waiting to hear his son's fate. I would not be the one to tell him what has happened. March!"

XIII

VALENTINE knew that fatal evening that Gaston would have to walk to Tarascon to cross the Rhone by the suspension bridge which connects Tarascon with Beaucaire, and did not expect to see him until eleven o'clock, the time which they had agreed upon the previous evening. But, happening to look up at the windows of Clameran long before the appointed hour, she saw lights hurrying to and fro in the different rooms in a most unusual manner. A secret and imperious voice within her breast told her that something terrible and extraordinary was going on at the chateau of Clameran. With her eyes fastened upon the dark mass looming in the distance she watched the going and coming of the lights, as if their movements would give her a clue to what was taking place within those walls. Her anxiety grew more intolerable every moment, when suddenly the well-known, beloved signal appeared in Gaston's window, informing her that her lover was about to swim across the Rhone. She could scarcely believe her eyes, and not until the signal had been thrice repeated did she answer it. Then, more dead than alive, she hastened, trembling, through the park to the river-bank. Never had she seen the Rhone so furious. Since Gaston was risking his life to see her, she could no longer doubt that something fearful had occurred at Clameran. She fell on her knees, and with clasped hands, her wild eyes fixed upon the dark waters, besought the pitiless stream to yield up her dear Gaston. Every dark object floating by assumed a human form. Once she thought she heard above the roaring of the water, the terrible, agonized cry of a drowning man. She watched and prayed, but her lover came not.

While the gendarmes and hussars slowly and silently returned to the chateau of Clameran, Gaston experienced one of those miracles which would seem incredible were they not confirmed by the most convincing proof. When he first plunged into the river, he rolled over five or six times, and was then drawn toward the bottom. In a swollen river the current varies at

different depths, being much stronger in some places than in others; hence the great danger. Gaston knew this, and guarded against it. Instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles, he held his breath and drifted with the flood. After he had been carried a considerable distance, he made a sudden spring, which brought him to the surface. Rapidly drifting by him was the old tree, and for some seconds he was entangled in a mass of rubbish; an eddy set him free. He did not dream of making for the opposite shore. He determined to land whereso-ever he could. With great presence of mind he exerted all his strength, so as to slowly take an oblique course, knowing well, however, that there was no hope for him if the current took him crosswise. This fearful current is, moreover, as capricious as it is terrible; sometimes rushing to the right, sometimes to the left, sparing one shore and ravaging the other. Gaston, familiar with every bend of the river, knew that there was an abrupt turning just below Clameran, and relied upon the eddy formed there to sweep him in the direction of La Verberie. His expectations were fulfilled. An oblique current suddenly swept him toward the right bank, and, had he not been on his guard, would have sunk him. He was still some distance from the shore, when, with lightning rapidity, he was swept past the park of La Verberie. He caught a glimpse of a white shadow among the trees: Valentine was waiting for him. At a considerable distance below, finding himself nearer the bank, he attempted to land. Feeling a foothold, he twice raised himself, each time being thrown down by the force of the current. Finally seizing some willow branches, and, clinging to them, he climbed up the steep bank. Without waiting to take breath, he darted off at once in the direction of the park. It was time he arrived, for, overcome by the intensity of her emotions, Valentine had fainted, lying apparently lifeless on the ground. Gaston's kisses aroused her.

"You!" she cried in a tone that revealed all the love she felt for him. "Is it indeed you? Then God heard my prayers, and had pity upon us."

"No, Valentine," he murmured, "God has had no pity."

The sad tones of Gaston's voice convinced her that her presentiment of evil was well founded. "What new misfortune strikes us now?" she exclaimed. "Why have you thus risked your life—a life far dearer to me than my own? What has happened?"

"This is what has happened, Valentine: our secret is a secret no longer; our love is the jest of the country."

She shrank back, and, burying her face in her hands, moaned piteously.

"This," continued Gaston, forgetting everything but his present misery; "this is the result of the blind enmity of our families. Our noble and pure love, which ought to be a glory in the eyes of God and man, has to be concealed, as though it were some evil deed."

"All is known, all is discovered!" murmured Valentine.

In the midst of the angry elements, Gaston had preserved his self-possession; but the heart-broken tones of his beloved Valentine overcame him. "And I was unable," he cried, "to crush the villains who dared to utter your adored name. Ah, why did I only kill two of the scoundrels!"

"You have killed some one, Gaston!"

"Yes," he replied, trying to overcome his emotion; "I have killed two men. I swam across the Rhone to save the honor of my name. Only a short time ago all the gendarmes of the place were pursuing me. I have escaped them, and now am flying the country."

Valentine struggled to preserve her composure. "Whither do you hope to fly?" she asked.

"I know not. God only knows whither I am to go or what will become of me. I must assume a false name and a disguise, and try to reach some foreign land which offers a refuge to murderers." Gaston stopped, expecting an answer to this speech. None came, and he resumed with extraordinary vehemence: "And before disappearing, Valentine, I wished to see you, because now, when I am abandoned by every one else, I have relied upon you, and had faith in your love. A tie unites us, my darling, stronger than all other earthly bonds—the tie of love. Before God you are my wife; I am yours and you are mine for life! Would you let me fly alone, Valentine? To the pain and toil of exile, to the bitter regrets of a ruined life, could you add the torture of separation?"

"Gaston, I implore you—"

"Ah, I knew it," he interrupted, mistaking the sense of her exclamation; "I knew you would not let me go alone. I knew your sympathetic heart would long to share the burden of my miseries. This moment effaces the wretched suffering I have endured. Let us fly! Having our happiness to defend, I fear

nothing; I can brave and conquer all. Come, my Valentine, we will escape, or die together! This is the long-dreamed-of happiness! The glorious future of love and liberty opens before us!"

He had worked himself into a state of delirious excitement. He seized Valentine round the waist and tried to carry her off. But, as his exaltation increased, she managed to regain her composure. Gently, yet with a firmness he had not expected in her, she withdrew herself from his embrace, and said sadly, but resolutely: "What you wish, Gaston, is impossible."

This cold, inexplicable resistance seemed to confound her lover. "Impossible?" he stammered.

"You know me well enough, Gaston, to be convinced that sharing the greatest hardships with you would to me be the height of happiness. But above your pleading, to which I fain would yield, above the voice of my own heart, which urges me to follow you, there is another—powerful, imperious—which bids me stay: the voice of duty."

"What! Would you think of remaining here after the horrible affair of to-night, after the scandal that will be spread abroad to-morrow!"

"What do you mean? That I am lost, dishonored? Am I any more so to-day than I was yesterday? Do you think that the jeers and scoffing of the world could make me suffer more than the pangs of my guilty conscience? I have long since passed judgment upon myself, Gaston; and, although the sound of your voice and the touch of your hand made me forget all save the bliss of love, no sooner had you gone than I wept tears of shame and remorse."

Gaston listened, motionless, astounded. He seemed to see a new Valentine before him, an entirely different woman from the one whose tender soul he thought he knew so well. "And your mother?" he murmured.

"It is my duty to her that keeps me here. Do you wish me to prove an unnatural daughter, and desert her now that she is poor, lonely, and friendless, with no one but me to cling to? Could I abandon her to follow my lover?"

"But our enemies will inform her of everything, Valentine; she will know all."

"No matter. The dictates of conscience must be obeyed. Ah, why can I not, even at the price of my life, spare her the agony of learning that her only daughter, her Valentine,

has disgraced her name? She may be hard, cruel, pitiless toward me; but have I not deserved it? Oh, my only friend, we have been basking in a dream too beautiful to last! I have long dreaded this awful awakening. Like two weak, credulous fools, we imagined that happiness could exist beyond the pale of duty. Sooner or later stolen joys must be dearly paid for. We must bow our heads and drink the cup to the dregs."

This cold reasoning, this sad resignation, was more than Gaston's fiery nature could bear. "Do not talk like that!" he cried. "Can you not feel that the bare idea of your suffering this humiliation drives me mad?"

"Alas! I must expect greater humiliation yet."

"What do you mean, Valentine?"

"Know then, Gaston—" But she stopped short, hesitated, and then added: "Nothing! I know not what I say."

Had Gaston been less excited, he would have suspected some new misfortune beneath Valentine's reticence; but his mind was too full of his one idea. "All hope is not lost," he resumed. "My father is kind hearted, and was touched by my love and despair. I am sure that my letters, together with the intercession of my brother Louis, will induce him to ask Madame de la Verberie for your hand."

This notion seemed to terrify Valentine. "Heaven forbid!" she exclaimed, "that the marquis should take this rash step!"

"Why, Valentine?"

"Because my mother would reject his offer; because, I must confess it now, she has sworn I shall marry none but a rich man; and your father is not rich."

"Good heavens!" cried Gaston with disgust, "and it is to such a mother that you sacrifice me?"

"She is my mother; that is sufficient. I have not the right to judge her. My duty is to remain with her, and remain I will." Valentine's manner showed such determined resolution that Gaston saw that further prayers would be in vain.

"Alas!" he cried as he wrung his hands with despair. "you do not love me; you have never loved me!"

"Gaston, Gaston! you do not think what you say!"

"If you loved me," he cried, "you could never, at this moment of separation, have the cruel courage to reason and calculate so coldly. Ah, far different is my love for you. Without you the world is void; to lose you is to die. So let the Rhone take back this life so miraculously saved; for it is now a bur-

den to me!" And he would have rushed toward the river, determined to die, had Valentine not held him back. "Is this the way to show your love for me?" she asked.

"What is the use of living?" he murmured dejectedly. "What is left to me now?"

"God is left to us, Gaston; and in His hands lies our future."

Like a shipwrecked man seizing a rotten plank, Gaston eagerly caught at the word *"future."* "Your command shall be obeyed," he cried with sudden enthusiasm. "Away with weakness! Yes, I will live, and struggle, and triumph. Madame de la Verberie wants gold; well, in three years I shall either be rich or dead." With clasped hands Valentine thanked heaven for this determination, which was more than she had dared hope for. "But," continued Gaston, "before going away I wish to intrust a sacred deposit to your keeping." And, drawing the jewels from his pocket and handing them to Valentine, he added: "These jewels belonged to my poor mother; you alone are worthy to wear them. I always intended them for you." And as she refused to accept them, he insisted. "Take them as a pledge of my return. If I do not come back within three years, you will know that I am dead, and then you must keep them as a souvenir of him who loved you so fondly." She burst into tears, and took the jewels. "And now," resumed Gaston, "I have a last request to make. Everybody believes me dead, but I can not let my poor old father remain under this impression. Swear to me that you will go yourself tomorrow morning and tell him that I am still alive."

"I will tell him," she replied.

Gaston felt that he must now tear himself away before his courage failed him. He enveloped Valentine in a last fond embrace, and started up. "What is your plan of escape?" she asked.

"I shall go to Marseilles, and take refuge in a friend's house until I can procure a passage on board some foreign-bound vessel."

"You must have assistance; I will secure you a guide in whom I have unbounded confidence; old Menoul, who lives near us. He owns the boat which he plies on the Rhone."

The lovers passed through the little park gate, of which Gaston had the key, and soon reached the boatman's cabin. He was dozing in his easy-chair by the fireside. When Valentine stood before him with Gaston, the old man jumped up,

and kept rubbing his eyes, thinking it must be a dream. "M. Menoul," said Valentine, "M. Gaston is compelled to hide himself; he wants to reach the sea, so that he can embark secretly. Can you take him in your boat as far as the mouth of the Rhone?"

"It is impossible," said the old man, shaking his head; "I dare not venture on the river in its present state."

"But, M. Menoul, you would be rendering an immense service to me; would you not venture for my sake?"

"For your sake? certainly I would, Mademoiselle Valentine; I am ready to start." He looked at Gaston, and, seeing his clothes wet and covered with mud, said to him: "Allow me, sir, to offer you some clothes of a son of mine who is dead; they will, at least, serve as a disguise: come this way."

In a few minutes old Menoul returned with Gaston, whom no one would have recognized in his sailor dress. Valentine went with them to the place where the boat was moored. While the old man was unfastening it, the disconsolate lovers tearfully embraced each other for the last time. "In three years," cried Gaston, "in three years!"

"Adieu, mademoiselle," interrupted the old boatman; "and you, sir, hold fast and keep steady." Then, with a vigorous shove of the boat-hook, he sent the boat into the middle of the stream.

Three days later, thanks to the assistance of old Menoul, Gaston was concealed on board the American three-master, "Tom Jones," Captain Warth, which was to start the next day for Valparaiso.

XIV

GOLD and white like a marble statue, Valentine stood on the river-bank, watching the frail bark which was carrying her lover away. It flew along like a bird in a tempest, and, after a few seconds, seemed like a black speck in the midst of the heavy fog. Gaston gone, she had no motive for concealing her despair; and, wringing her hands, she sobbed as if her

heart would break. Her calmness, bravery, and hopefulness were gone. She felt crushed and lost, as if that swiftly disappearing bark had carried off the better part of herself. For while Gaston treasured a ray of hope, she looked forward only to shame and sorrow. The horrible facts which stared her in the face convinced her that happiness in this life was over; the future was worse than blank. She wept and shuddered at the prospect. She slowly retraced her footsteps through the little gate which had so often admitted Gaston; and, as she closed it behind her, she fancied she was placing an impassable barrier between herself and happiness. Before retiring, Valentine carefully walked round the chateau, and examined the windows of her mother's chamber. They were still brilliantly lighted, for Madame de la Verberie passed a part of the night in reading, and did not rise till late in the morning. Enjoying the comforts, which are not expensive in the country, the selfish comtesse was little concerned about her daughter. She left her at perfect liberty to go and come, and to take long walks, never making a remark.

But on this night Valentine feared being seen. She would be called upon to explain her torn, muddy dress—and what answer could she give? Fortunately she reached her room without meeting any one, and there, seated before her little work-table, she examined the purse of jewels. It would be a sweet, sad comfort to wear the simplest of the rings, she thought; but her mother would ask her where it came from, and she would have to deceive her again. She kissed the purse, in memory of Gaston, and then concealed it at the bottom of a drawer.

Blinded by his passion, Gaston did not think of the obstacles and dangers to be braved in going to Clameran to inform the old marquis of his son's miraculous preservation. Valentine saw them only too clearly; yet it did not occur to her for an instant to break her promise or delay to go. At sunrise she dressed herself. When the bell was ringing for early mass, she started on her errand. One of the servants, Mihonne, who always waited on Valentine, was scrubbing the hall.

"If my mother asks for me," she said to the girl, "tell her I have gone to early mass."

As she often went to church at this hour, there was nothing to be feared so far; but Valentine knew that she could scarcely return in time for breakfast, for she must walk a league to the

bridge, and it was another league to Clameran; four leagues there and back. She set out at a rapid pace. The consciousness of performing an extraordinary action, and the feverish anxiety of incurred peril, increased her haste. She forgot fatigue, and that she had worn herself out with weeping all night. It was after eight, however, when she reached the long avenue leading to the chateau of Clameran. She had only proceeded a few steps along it, when she saw old Jean, the marquis's valet, coming down the path. She stopped and waited for him, and he hastened his steps at sight of her. He looked very much excited, and his eyes were swollen with weeping. To Valentine's surprise, he did not take off his cap to her, but accosted her most rudely.

"Are you going to the chateau, mademoiselle?"

"Yes."

"If you are going after M. Gaston," continued the servant with an insolent sneer, "you are taking useless trouble. M. Gaston is dead, mademoiselle; he sacrificed himself for a mistress he had."

Valentine turned white at this insult, but took no notice of it. Jean, who expected to see her overcome by the dreadful news, was bewildered and indignant at her composure. "I am going to the chateau," she resumed quietly, "to speak to the marquis."

Jean stifled a sob, and said: "Then it is not worth while to go any farther."

"Why?"

"Because the Marquis de Clameran died at five o'clock this morning."

Valentine leaned against a tree to prevent herself from falling. "Dead!" she gasped.

"Yes," said Jean fiercely, "yes, dead!" A faithful servant of the old regime, Jean shared all the passions, weaknesses, friendships, and enmities of his master. He had a horror of the La Verberies. And now he saw in Valentine the woman who had caused the death of the marquis whom he had served for forty years, and of Gaston whom he worshiped. "I will tell you how he died," continued the bitter old man. "Yesterday evening, when the news reached the marquis that his eldest son was dead, he who was hardy as an oak dropped down as if struck by lightning. I was there. He beat the air wildly with his hands, and fell without uttering one word. We put him to

bed, and M. Louis galloped into Tarascon for a doctor. But the blow had struck too deeply. When Dr. Raget arrived he said there was no hope. At daybreak, the marquis recovered consciousness enough to ask for M. Louis, with whom he remained alone for some minutes. His last words were: 'Father and son on the same day, there will be rejoicing at la Verberie.'"

Valentine might have soothed the faithful servant's sorrow by telling him that Gaston still lived; but she feared it would be indiscreet, and so, unfortunately, she merely said: "Then I must see M. Louis."

These words seemed to anger Jean the more. "You!" he exclaimed. "You would dare to take such a step, Mademoiselle de la Verberie? What! would you presume to appear before him after what has happened? I will never allow it! And you had best, moreover, take my advice, and return home at once. I will not answer for the tongues of the servants here, when they see you." And, without waiting for an answer, he hurried away.

What could Valentine do? Humiliated and miserable, she could only wearily drag her aching limbs back the way she had so rapidly come but a short time before. On the road, she met many country people coming from the town, where they had heard of the events of the previous night; and at every step the poor girl was greeted with insulting looks and mocking bows. When she reached La Verberie, she found Mihonne watching for her.

"Ah, mademoiselle," said the girl, "make haste. Madame had a visitor this morning, and ever since she left has been calling out for you. Hurry; but take care what you do, for she is in a violent passion."

Madame de la Verberie had preserved the manners of the good old times, when grand ladies swore like troopers. When Valentine appeared, she was overwhelmed with coarse epithets and violent abuse. The comtesse had been informed of everything, with many gross additions added by public scandal. An old dowager, her most intimate friend, had hurried over early in the morning to offer her this most poisoned dish of gossip, seasoned with her own pretended condolences. In this sad affair, Madame de la Verberie mourned less over her daughter's loss of reputation than over the ruin of her own projects—projects of arranging a grand marriage for Valentine, and of

herself living in luxury the rest of her days. A young girl so compromised would not find it easy to get a husband. It would now be absolutely necessary to keep her two years longer in the country before introducing her into Parisian society. The world must have time to forget this shameful affair.

"You worthless wretch!" cried the comtesse, red with fury; "is it thus you respect the noble traditions of our family? Up to now it has never been considered necessary to watch the La Verberies; they could take care of their honor: but it was reserved for you to take advantage of your liberty to lower yourself to the level of those harlots who are the disgrace of their sex!"

With a sinking heart, Valentine had foreseen this tirade. She felt that it was only a fitting punishment for her guilty love. Knowing that her mother's indignation was just, she meekly hung her head like a repentant culprit at the bar of justice. But this silence only exasperated the angry comtesse the more. "Why do you not answer me?" she screamed with a threatening gesture.

"What can I say, mother?"

"Say, miserable girl? Say that they lied when they accused a La Verberie of disgracing her name! Speak, defend yourself!" Valentine mournfully shook her head, but said nothing. "It is true, then!" shrieked the comtesse, beside herself with rage; "what they said is true?"

"Forgive me, mother," moaned the poor girl; "forgive me."

"What! Forgive you! I have not then been deceived. Forgive you! Do you own it then, you hussy! Good heavens! what blood have you in your veins? Do you not know that some faults should be persistently denied, no matter how glaring the evidence against them? And you are my daughter! Can you not understand that an ignominious confession like this should never be forced from a woman by any human power? But no, you have lovers, and unblushingly avow it. Glory in it, it would be something new!"

"Alas! you are pitiless, mother!"

"Did you have any pity for me, my dutiful daughter? Did it never occur to you that your disgrace might kill me? Ah! many a time, I dare say, you and your lover have laughed at my blind confidence. For I had confidence in you as in myself. I believed you to be as chaste and pure as when I watched you lying in your cradle. And it has come to this: drunken men

make a jest of your name in the wine-shops, then fight about you, and kill each other. I intrusted to you the honor of our name, and what have you done with it? You have given it to the first comer!" This was too much for Valentine. The words, "first comer," wounded her pride more than all the other abuse heaped upon her. She tried to protest against this unmerited insult. "Ah, I have made a mistake. Your lover is not the first comer," said the comtesse. "With the number you had to choose from, you must fix on the heir of our enemies of a hundred years, Gaston de Clameran. A coward, who publicly boasted of your favors; a wretch, who tried to avenge himself for the heroism of our ancestors by ruining you and me—an old woman and a child!"

"No, mother, that is false. He loved me, and, had he dared hope for your consent—"

"He would have married you? Ah! never. I would rather see you fall lower than you are, even to the gutter, than know you to be the wife of such a man!" Thus the comtesse expressed her hatred very much in the same terms as the old marquis had used to his son. "Besides," she added, with a ferocity which only a woman is capable of, "besides, your lover is drowned, and the old marquis is dead, so I have been told. God is just; we are avenged."

Old Jean's words, "There will be rejoicing at La Verberie," rung in Valentine's ears as she saw the comtesse's eyes sparkle with malignant joy. This was the crowning blow for the unfortunate young girl. For half an hour she had been exerting all her strength to bear up against her mother's cruel violence; but her physical endurance was not equal to the task. She turned, if possible, paler, and with half-closed eyes extended her arms as though to find some support, and fell, striking her head against a side table. It was with dry eyes that the comtesse beheld her daughter stretched at her feet. Her vanity was deeply wounded, but no other emotion disturbed her. Hers was a heart so full of anger and hatred that there was no room for any noble sentiment. Seeing, however, that Valentine remained unconscious, she rang the bell; and the affrighted maidservants, who were trembling in the passage at the loud and angry tones of the voice they all dreaded, came running in.

"Carry mademoiselle to her room," she ordered; "lock her in, and bring me the key."

The comtesse intended keeping Valentine a close prisoner

for a long time. She well knew the mischievous, gossiping propensities of country people, who, from mere idleness, indulge in limitless scandal. A poor fallen girl must either leave the place, or drink to the very dregs the chalice of premeditated humiliation and brutal irony. Each one delights in casting a stone at her. But the comtesse's plans were destined to be baffled. The servants came to tell her that Valentine had recovered consciousness, but seemed to be very ill. She replied that it was all pretense; whereupon Mihonne insisted upon her going up and judging for herself. She unwillingly went to her daughter's room, and perceived that something serious was the matter. However, she betrayed no apprehension, but sent to Tarascon for Dr. Raget, who was the oracle of the neighborhood; it was he who had been called in to see the Marquis de Clameran. Dr. Raget was one of those men who leave a blessed memory, which lives long after their departure from this world. Intelligent and noble-hearted, he devoted himself to his art; wealthy, he never demanded to be paid for his services. At all hours of the night and day, his gray horse and old cabriolet might be seen along the roads, with a hamper of wine and soup under the seat for his poorer patients. The servant fortunately found him at home, and brought him back with him. On beholding Valentine, the doctor's face assumed a most serious expression. He studied the young girl and her mother alternately; and the penetrating gaze which he fixed on the old comtesse so disconcerted her that she felt her wrinkled face turning very red.

"This child is very ill," he said, at length. And as Madame de la Verberie made no reply, he added: "I desire to remain alone with her for a few minutes."

The comtesse dared not resist the authority of a man of Dr. Raget's character and reputation, and retired to the next room, apparently calm, but in reality disturbed by the most gloomy forebodings. At the end of half an hour—it seemed a century—the doctor entered the room where she was waiting. He, who had witnessed so much suffering and misery, appeared deeply affected.

"Well?" asked the comtesse.

"You are a mother, madame," he answered sadly—"that is to say, your heart is full of indulgence and pardon. Summon all your courage. Mademoiselle Valentine will soon become a mother."

"The worthless creature! I feared as much."

The doctor was shocked at the dreadful expression of the comtesse's eye. He laid his hand on her arm, and giving her a penetrating look, beneath which she instantly quailed, he added: "And the child must live."

The doctor's suspicions were correct. A dreadful idea had flashed across Madame de la Verberie's mind—the idea of destroying this child which would be a living proof of Valentine's sin. Feeling her evil intention divined, the proud, stern woman's eyes fell beneath the doctor's gaze. "I do not understand you, Dr. Raget," she murmured.

"But I know what I mean, madame; and I simply wished to tell you that a crime does not obliterate a fault."

"Doctor!"

"I merely say what I think, madame. If I was mistaken in my impression, so much the better for you. At present, your daughter's condition is serious, but not dangerous. Excitement and distress of mind have unstrung her nerves, and she is now in a high fever, which I hope soon to allay."

The comtesse saw that the old doctor's suspicions were not dispelled; so she thought she would try maternal anxiety, and said: "At least, doctor, you can assure me that the dear child's life is not in danger?"

"No, madame," answered Dr. Raget, with cutting irony, "your maternal tenderness need not be alarmed. All the poor child needs is rest of mind, which you alone can give her. A few kind words from you will do her more good than all my prescriptions. But remember, madame, that the least shock of nervous excitement will produce the most fatal consequences."

"I must confess," said the comtesse, hypocritically, "that I was unable to control my anger upon first hearing that my darling child had fallen a victim to a vile seducer."

"But now that the first shock is over, madame, being a mother and a Christian, you will do your duty. My duty is to save your daughter and her child, and I will do so. I will call to-morrow."

Madame de la Verberie had no idea of letting the doctor go off in this way. She motioned him to stay, and, without reflecting that she was betraying herself, exclaimed: "Do you pretend to say, sir, that you will prevent my taking every means to conceal the terrible misfortune that has fallen upon me? Do you wish our shame to be made public—to make us the laughing-stock of the neighborhood?"

The doctor remained a moment without answering; the con-

dition of affairs was serious. "No, madame," he at length replied; "I can not prevent your leaving La Verberie—that would be overstepping my duty; but I must hold you to account for the child. You are at liberty to go where you please; but you must give me proof of the child's being alive, or at least that no attempt was made against its life."

After uttering these threatening words he left the house. The comtesse was choking with suppressed rage. "Insolent upstart!" she cried, "to presume to dictate to a woman of my rank! Ah, if I were not completely at his mercy!" But, being in his power, she knew very well that she must forever bid adieu to all her ambitious plans. No more hopes of luxury, of a millionaire son-in-law, of splendid carriages, rich dresses, and charming card parties, where she could gamble to her heart's content. She must die as she had lived, poor, neglected, condemned to a life of privation. And it was Valentine who brought this misery upon her. This reflection aroused all her inherent bitterness, and she felt for her daughter one of those implacable hatreds which, instead of becoming appeased, are strengthened by time. She wished she could see her lying dead before her, and the accursed infant as well. But she remembered the doctor's threatening look, and dared not attempt anything. She even forced herself to go and say a few forgiving words to Valentine, and then left her to the care of the faithful Mihonne.

Poor Valentine! She had suffered so much that she had lost all power of action. She was, however, getting better. She felt that dull, heavy sensation, almost free from pain, which always follows violent mental or physical suffering. When she was able to reflect, she thought to herself: "Well, it is over; my mother knows everything. I have no longer her anger to fear, and must trust to time for her forgiveness." This was the secret which Valentine had been unwilling to reveal to Gaston, because she felt certain that he would refuse to leave her if he knew it. But she wished him to escape; and duty at the same time bade her remain. Even now she did not regret having done so.

The only thought which distressed her was Gaston's danger. Had he succeeded in embarking? How could she find out? For two days the doctor had allowed her to get up; but she could not possibly walk as far as old Menoul's cabin. Happily, the devoted old boatman was intelligent enough to anticipate

her wishes. Hearing that the young lady at the chateau was very ill, he set about devising some means of informing her of her friend's safety. He went to La Verberie several times on pretended errands, and finally succeeded in seeing Valentine. They were not alone, so he could not speak to her; but he made her understand by a significant look that Gaston was out of danger. This knowledge contributed more toward Valentine's recovery than all the medicines administered by the doctor, who, after visiting her daily for six weeks, at length pronounced his patient sufficiently strong to bear the fatigues of a journey. The comtesse had waited with the greatest impatience for this decision. In order to prevent any delay, she had already realized half of her capital at a loss, and said to herself that the sum thus raised, some twenty-five thousand francs, would suffice for all contingent expenses. For a fortnight she had been calling on all her friends, saying that as soon as her daughter had recovered her health she meant to take her to England to visit a rich old relation, who had expressed a wish to see her.

Valentine looked forward to this journey with terror, and shuddered when her mother said to her, on the evening that the doctor gave her permission to set out: "We shall start the day after to-morrow." Only one day left! And Valentine had been unable to let Louis de Clameran know that his brother was still living. In this extremity she was obliged to confide in Mihonne, and sent her with a letter to Louis. But the faithful servant had a useless walk. The chateau of Clameran was deserted; all the servants had been dismissed, and M. Louis, whom they now called the marquis, had gone away.

At last they started. Madame de la Verberie, feeling that she could trust Mihonne, decided to take her with them, after making her swear eternal secrecy. It was in a little village near London that the comtesse, under the assumed name of Mrs. Wilson, took up her abode with her daughter and maid-servant. She selected England, because she had lived there a long time, and was well acquainted with the manners and habits of the people, and spoke their language as well as she did her own. She had kept up an acquaintance with some of the English nobility, and often dined and went to the theatre with her friends in London. On these occasions she always took the humiliating precaution of locking Valentine in her room. It was in their sad, solitary house, one night in

the month of May, that the son of Valentine de la Verberie was born. He was taken to the parish priest, and christened Valentin Raoul Wilson. The comtesse had prepared everything, and for five hundred pounds had engaged an honest farmer's wife to bring the child up as her own, and, when old enough, have him taught a trade. Little Raoul was handed over to her a few hours after his birth. The good woman thought him the child of an English lady, and there seemed no probability that he would ever discover the secret of his birth. Restored to consciousness, Valentine asked for her child. She yearned to clasp it to her bosom; but the cruel comtesse was pitiless. "Your child!" she cried, "I do not know what you mean; you must be dreaming; you are mad!" And as Valentine persisted, she replied: "Your child is safe, and will want for nothing; let that suffice. You must forget what has happened, as you would forget a painful dream. The past must be wiped out forever. You know me well enough to understand that I mean to be obeyed."

The moment had come when Valentine ought in some degree to have resisted the comtesse's continually increasing tyranny. She had the idea, but not the courage to do so. If, on one side, she saw the dangers of almost culpable resignation—for she, too, was a mother!—on the other she felt crushed by the consciousness of her guilt. She yielded; and surrendered herself forever into the hands of a mother whose conduct she refrained from questioning, to escape the necessity of condemning it. So much suffering, so many regrets and internal struggles, for a long time delayed her recovery, but toward the end of June, the comtesse took her back to La Verberie. This time the mischief-makers and gossips were not so sharp as usual. The comtesse went about, complaining of the bad success of her trip to England, and was able to assure herself that no one suspected her real reason for the journey. Only one man, Dr. Raget, knew the truth; and, although Madame de la Verberie hated him from the bottom of her heart, she did him the justice to feel sure that he would not prove indiscreet.

Her first visit was paid to him. When he entered the room, she abruptly threw on the table the official documents which she had procured especially for this purpose. "These will prove to you, sir, that the child is living, and well cared for at a cost that I can ill afford."—"These are perfectly correct, madame," he replied, after an attentive examination of the

papers, "and, if your conscience does not reproach you, of course I have nothing to say."—"My conscience reproaches me with nothing, sir."

The old doctor shook his head, and gazing searchingly into her eyes, retorted: "Can you say that you have not been harsh, even to cruelty?" She turned away her head, and, assuming her grand air, answered: "I have acted as a woman of my rank should act; and I am surprised to find in you an advocate of misconduct."

"Ah, madame," said the doctor, "it is your place to show kindness to the poor girl. What indulgence do you expect from strangers toward your unhappy daughter, when you, her mother, are so pitiless?"

Such plain spoken truths were more than the comtesse cared to hear, and she rose to leave. "Is that all that you have to say to me, Dr. Raget?" she asked haughtily. "Yes, madame; I have done. My only object was to spare you eternal remorse."

The good doctor was mistaken in his idea of Madame de la Verberie's character. She was utterly incapable of feeling remorse; but she suffered cruelly when her selfish vanity was wounded, or her comfort disturbed. She resumed her old mode of living, but, having disposed of a part of her income, found it difficult to make both ends meet. This furnished her with an inexhaustible text for complaint; and at every meal she reproached Valentine most unmercifully. She seemed to forget her own command, that the past should be buried in oblivion, and constantly recurred to it; a day seldom passed, without her saying to Valentine: "Your conduct has ruined us."

One day her daughter could not refrain from replying: "I suppose you would have forgiven me had it enriched us." But these revolts on Valentine's part were rare, although her life was a series of tortures inflicted with most refined cruelty. Even the memory of Gaston had become a suffering. Perhaps, discovering the uselessness of her sacrifice, of her courage, and her devotion to what she had considered her duty, she regretted not having followed him. What had become of him? Why had he not contrived to send her a letter, a word to let her know that he was still alive? He had sworn to return a rich man before three years had passed. Would he ever return? There was a risk in his returning under any circumstances. His disappearance had not put an end to the terrible affair at Tarascon. He was supposed to be dead; but, as there was no

positive proof of his death, and his body could not be found, justice was compelled to listen to the clamor of public opinion. The case was brought before the assize court; and Gaston de Clameran was sentenced to several years' imprisonment. As to Louis de Clameran, no one knew positively what had become of him. Some people said he was leading a life of reckless extravagance at Paris. Informed of these facts by her faithful Mihonne, Valentine became more hopeless than ever. All her energy was gone, and she finally reached that state of passive resignation peculiar to people who are constantly oppressed.

In this miserable way four years passed since the fatal evening when Gaston had escaped in old Menoul's boat. Madame de la Verberie had spent these four years most unprofitably. Seeing that she could not live upon her income, and having too much false pride to sell her land, which was so badly managed that it did not even bring her in two per cent, she resigned herself to borrowing and spent her capital with her income. As in such matters, it is only the first step that costs; the comtesse soon made rapid strides, saying to herself, like the late Marquis de Clameran: "After me, the deluge!" She no longer thought of anything but taking her ease. She had frequent "at homes," and paid many visits to the neighboring towns of Nimes and Avignon; she sent to Paris for the most elegant toilets, and indulged her taste for good living. She allowed herself all the luxury that she had hoped to obtain by the acquisition of a rich son-in-law. Great sorrows require consolation! The first year after she returned from London she did not hesitate to treat herself to a horse; it was rather old, to be sure, but when harnessed to a second-hand carriage bought on credit at Beaucaire made quite a good appearance. She would quiet her conscience, which occasionally reproached her for this constant extravagance, by saying: "I am so unhappy!" The unhappiness was that this seeming luxury cost her dear, very dear. After having sold the rest of her bonds, the comtesse first mortgaged the estate of La Verberie and then the chateau itself. And in less than four years she owed more than forty thousand francs, and was unable even to pay the interest of her debt.

She was racking her mind to discover some means of escape from her difficulties, when chance came to her rescue. For some time a young engineer, employed in surveys along the

Rhone, had made the village close to La Verberie the centre of his operations. Being handsome, agreeable, and of polished manners, he had been warmly welcomed by the neighboring society, and the comtesse frequently met him at the houses of her friends where she went to play cards of an evening. This young engineer was named Andre Fauvel. The first time he met Valentine he was struck by her beauty, and after once looking into her large, melancholy eyes, his admiration deepened into love, though he had not even spoken to her. He was well off; a splendid career was open to him; he was free; and he swore that Valentine should be his. It was to an old friend of Madame de la Verberie, as noble as a Montmorency and as poor as Job, that he first confided his matrimonial plans. With the precision of a graduate of the polytechnic school, he enumerated all his qualifications for being a model son-in-law. For a long time the old lady listened to him without interruption; but when he had finished she did not hesitate to tell him that his pretensions were most presumptuous. What! he, a man of no pedigree, a Fauvel, a common surveyor, to aspire to the hand of a La Verberie! After having enumerated all the superior advantages of that superior order of beings, the nobility, she condescended to take a common-sense view of the case, and said: "However, you may succeed. The poor comtesse owes money in every direction; scarcely a day passes without the bailiffs calling upon her; so that, you understand, if a rich suitor appeared, and agreed to her terms respecting the settlements—well, well, there is no knowing what might happen."

Andre Fauvel was young; the old lady's insinuations seemed to him odious. On reflection, however, when he had studied the character of the nobility of the neighborhood, who were rich in nothing but prejudices, he clearly saw that pecuniary considerations alone would be strong enough to induce the proud Comtesse de la Verberie to grant him her daughter's hand. This certainty ended his hesitations, and he turned his whole attention to devising a plan for presenting his claim. He did not find this an easy thing to accomplish. To go in quest of a wife with her purchase-money in his hand was repugnant to his feelings, and contrary to his ideas of delicacy. But he knew no one who could undertake the matter for him, and his love was strong enough to make him swallow his repugnance. The occasion so anxiously awaited, to explain his intentions, soon presented itself.

One day as he entered a hotel at Beaucaire to dine, he saw Madame de la Verberie about to seat herself at the table. He blushed deeply, and asked permission to sit beside her, which was granted him with a most encouraging smile. Did the comtesse suspect the love of the young engineer? Had she been warned by her friend? Perhaps so. At any rate, without giving Andre time to gradually approach the subject weighing on his mind, she began to complain of the hard times, the scarcity of money, and the grasping meanness of the tradespeople. The truth is, she had come to Beaucaire to borrow money, and had found every cash-box closed against her; and her lawyer had advised her to sell her land for what it would bring. Anger, joined to that secret instinct of the situation of affairs which is the sixth sense of a woman, loosened her tongue, and made her more communicative to this comparative stranger than she had ever been to her bosom friends. She explained to him the horror of her situation, her present needs, her anxiety for the future, and, above all, her great distress at not being able to marry off her beloved daughter. Andre listened to these complaints with becoming commiseration, but in reality he was delighted. Without giving her time to finish her tale, he began to state what he called his view of the matter. He said that, although he sympathized deeply with the comtesse, he could not account for her uneasiness about her daughter. What? Could she be disturbed at having no dowry for her? Why, the rank and beauty of Mademoiselle Valentine were a fortune in themselves, of which any man might be proud. He knew more than one man who would esteem himself only too happy if Mademoiselle Valentine would accept his name, and confer upon him the sweet duty of relieving her mother from all anxiety and care. Finally, he did not think the situation of the comtesse's affairs nearly so desperate as she imagined. How much money would be necessary to pay off the mortgages upon La Verberie? About forty thousand francs, perhaps? Indeed! That was but a mere trifle. Besides, this sum would not be a gift from the son-in-law, but only a loan, because the estate would be his in the end, and greatly increased in value. A man, too, worthy of Valentine's love could never let his wife's mother want for the comforts and luxuries due to a lady of her age, rank, and misfortunes. He would be only to glad to offer her a sufficient income, not only to provide comfort, but even luxury.

As Andre spoke in a tone too earnest to be assumed, it seemed to the comtesse that a celestial dew was dropping upon her pecuniary wounds. Her countenance was radiant with joy, her fierce little eyes beamed with the most encouraging tenderness, her thin lips were wreathed in the most friendly smiles. One thought alone disturbed the young engineer. "Does she understand me? Does she think I'm serious?" he wondered. She certainly did, as her subsequent remarks proved. "Alas!" she sighed, "forty thousand francs will not save La Verberie; the principal and interest of the debt amount to at least sixty thousand."

"Oh, either forty or sixty thousand is nothing worth speaking of."

"Then my son-in-law, the phenix we are supposing, would he have the forethought to provide for my requirements?"

"I should fancy he would be delighted to add four thousand francs to the income you derive from your estate."

The comtesse did not reply at once; she was calculating. "Four thousand francs is not much," she said after a pause. "Everything is so dear in this part of the country! But with six thousand francs—yes, six thousand francs would make me happy!"

The young man thought that her demands were becoming excessive, but, with the generosity of an ardent lover, he replied: "The son-in-law of whom we are speaking would not be very devoted to Mademoiselle Valentine if the paltry sum of two thousand francs caused him to hesitate."

"You promise too much!" murmured the comtesse. A sudden objection, however, occurred to her. "But this imaginary son-in-law," she remarked, "must be possessed of the means to fulfil his promises. I have my daughter's happiness too much at heart to give her to a man who did not produce—what do you call them?—securities, guarantees."

"Decidedly," thought Fauvel with mortification, "we are making a bargain." Then he added aloud: "Of course, your son-in-law would bind himself in the marriage contract to—"

"Never!—sir, never! Think of the impropriety of the thing! What would the world say?"

"Excuse me, it would be stated that it was the interest of a sum received from you."

"Ah! yes, that might do very well."

The comtesse insisted upon seeing Andre home in her car-

riage. During the drive no definite plan was agreed upon between them; but they understood each other so well that, when the comtesse set the young engineer down at his own door, she invited him to dinner the next day, and held out her skinny hand, which Andre kissed with devotion as he thought of Valentine's pretty eyes. When Madame de la Verberie returned home, the servants were dumb with astonishment at her good humor; they had not seen her in this happy frame of mind for years. And her day's work was of a nature to elevate her spirits: she had been most unexpectedly raised from a very difficult position to affluence. "An annuity of six thousand francs," said she to herself, "and a thousand crowns from the estate, that makes nine thousand francs a year! My daughter will live in Paris after she is married, and I can go and see my dear children without expense." At this price she would have sold not only one but three daughters, if she had possessed them. But suddenly her blood ran cold at a sudden thought which crossed her mind: "Would Valentine consent?"

Her anxiety to set her mind at rest sent her straightway to her daughter's room. She found Valentine reading by the light of a flickering candle. "My daughter," she said abruptly, "a young man of whom I approve has demanded your hand in marriage, and I have promised it to him."

At this startling announcement, Valentine started up: "Impossible!" she murmured, "impossible!"

"And why, if you please?"

"Did you tell him, mother, what I am? Did you own—"

"Your past folly? No, thank heavens! and I hope you will have the good sense to keep silent on the subject."

Although Valentine's spirit was completely crushed by her mother's tyranny, her sense of honor revolted at the idea. "You certainly would not wish me to marry an honest man, mother, without confessing to him everything connected with the past? I could never practise a deception so base."

The comtesse felt very much like flying into a passion; but she knew that threats would be of no avail in this instance, where resistance would be a matter of conscience with her daughter. Instead of commanding, she entreated. "Poor child," she said, "my poor dear Valentine, if you only knew the dreadful state of our affairs you would not talk in this way. Your folly commenced our ruin; to-day it is complete. Do you know that our creditors threaten to turn us out of La Verberie? Then

what will become of us, my poor child? Must I in my old age go begging from door to door? We are utterly lost, and this marriage is our only hope of salvation."

These tearful entreaties were followed by plausible arguments. The dear comtesse made use of strange and subtle theories. What she formerly regarded as a monstrous crime, she now spoke of as a peccadillo. According to her, girls in Valentine's position were to be met with every day. She could understand, she said, her daughter's scruples if there were any danger of the past being brought to light; but she had taken such precautions that there was no fear of that. Would it make her love her husband any the less? No. Would he be less happy? No. Then that being so, why hesitate? Shocked, bewildered, Valentine asked herself if this was really her mother, the haughty woman who had always been such a worshiper of honor and duty, who now contradicted every word she had uttered during her life! Valentine could not understand the sudden change. The comtesse's subtle arguments and shameful sophistry neither moved nor convinced her; but she had not the courage to resist the tearful entreaties of that mother, who ended by falling on her knees, and with clasped hands imploring her child to save her. Violently agitated, distracted by a thousand conflicting emotions, daring neither to refuse nor to promise, fearing the consequences of a decision thus forced from her, the unhappy girl begged her mother to grant her a few hours to reflect.

Madame de la Verberie dared not refuse this request, and acquiesced.

"I will leave you, my daughter," she said, "and I trust your heart will tell you how to decide between a useless confession and your mother's salvation." With these words she left the room, indignant but hopeful.

Placed between two obligations equally sacred, equally binding, but diametrically opposed, Valentine's troubled mind could no longer clearly discern the path of duty. Could she reduce her mother to want and misery? Could she basely deceive the confidence and love of an honorable man? However she decided, her future life would be one of suffering and remorse. Alas! why had she not a wise and kind adviser to point out the right course to pursue, and assist her in struggling against evil influences? Why had she not that gentle, discreet friend who had helped her in her first misfortunes, old Dr. Raget?

Formerly, the memory of Gaston had been her guiding star; but now this far-off memory was nothing but a sort of vanishing dream. In romance we meet with heroines of life-long constancy; real life produces few such miracles. For a long time Valentine's mind had been filled with the image of Gaston. As the hero of her dreams, she dwelt fondly on his memory; but the mists of time had gradually dimmed the brilliancy of her idol, which was now no more than a cold relic at the bottom of her heart. When she arose the next morning, pale and weak from a sleepless, tearful night, she was almost resolved to confess everything; but when the evening came, and she found herself in the company of Andre Fauvel, and in the presence of her mother's alternately threatening and supplicating glances, her courage failed her. She would say to herself: "I will tell him." But later on she added: "I will wait till to-morrow." The comtesse saw all these struggles, but was not made uneasy by them. She knew by experience that when a painful duty is put off it is never performed. There was, perhaps, some excuse for Valentine in the horror of her situation. Perhaps, unknown to herself, she felt a faint hope arise within her. Any marriage, even an unhappy one, offered the prospect of a change, of a new life, a relief from the insupportable suffering she was then enduring. Sometimes, in her ignorance of human life, she imagined that time and close intimacy would make it almost easy for her to confess her terrible fault, and that Andre would pardon her and marry her all the same, since he loved her so much. That he sincerely loved her, she knew full well. It was not the impetuous passion of Gaston, with its excitements and terrors, but a calm, steady, and perhaps more lasting affection, obtaining a sort of blissful rest in its legitimacy and constancy.

Thus Valentine gradually became accustomed to Andre's presence, and was surprised into feeling very happy at the constant delicate attentions and affectionate looks that he lavished upon her. She did not feel any love for him yet; but a separation would have distressed her deeply. During the courtship, the comtesse's conduct was a masterpiece. She suddenly ceased arguing and importuning, and with tearful resignation said she would not attempt to influence her daughter's decision; but she went about sighing and groaning as if she were on the eve of starving to death. She also made arrangements for being tormented by the bailiffs. Distress-warrants and legal notices

poured in at La Verberie, and she would show Valentine all these documents, saying: "God grant we may not be driven from the home of our ancestors before your marriage, my darling!" Knowing that her presence was sufficient to freeze any confession on her daughter's lips, she never left her alone with Andre. "Once married," she thought, "they can settle the matter to please themselves." She was as impatient as Andre, and hastened the preparations for the wedding. She gave Valentine no opportunity for reflection. She kept her constantly busy, either in driving to town to purchase some article of dress, or in paying visits.

At last the eve of the wedding-day found the comtesse hopeful, though oppressed with anxiety, like the gambler playing for a high stake. On this evening, for the first time, Valentine found herself alone with the man who was to become her husband. It was twilight, and she was sitting in the drawing-room, miserable and trembling, anxious to unburden her mind, when Andre entered. Seeing that she was agitated, he pressed her hand, and gently begged her to tell him the cause of her sorrow. "Am I not your best friend," he said, "and ought I not to be the confidant of your troubles, if you have any? Why these tears, my darling?"

At this moment she was on the point of confessing everything. But suddenly she perceived the scandal that would result, the pain she would cause Andre, and her mother's anger; she saw her own future life ruined—she exclaimed, like all young girls when the eventful moment draws near: "I am afraid." Imagining that she was merely disturbed by some vague fears, he tried to console and reassure her; but he was surprised to find that his affectionate words only seemed to increase her distress. But already Madame de la Verberie came to interrupt them: they were wanted to sign the marriage contract. Andre Fauvel was left in ignorance.

On the morrow, a lovely spring day, Andre Fauvel and Valentine de la Verberie were married at the village church. Early in the morning the chateau was filled with the bride's friends, who came, according to custom, to assist at her wedding toilet. Valentine forced herself to appear calm, even smiling; but her face was whiter than her veil—her heart was torn by remorse. She felt as though the sad truth were written upon her brow, and that her white dress was but a bitter irony, a galling humiliation. She shuddered when her most intimate

friend placed the wreath of orange-blossoms upon her head. It seemed to her that this emblem of purity would burn her. It did not do so, but one of the wire stems of the flowers, badly covered, scratched her forehead, which bled a great deal, and a drop of blood fell upon her dress. What an evil omen! Valentine almost fainted. But presages are deceitful, as it proved with Valentine; for a year after her marriage she was, according to report, the happiest of wives. Happy! yes, she would have been completely so could she only have forgotten the past. Andre adored her. He had gone into business, and everything succeeded with him. But he wished to be immensely rich, not for himself, but for the wife he loved, whom he longed to surround with every luxury. Thinking her the most lovely, he wished to see her the most adorned.

Eighteen months after her marriage, Madame Fauvel had a son. But, alas! neither this child, nor a second son, born a year after, could make her forget the other one—the poor, forsaken babe whom, for a sum of money, a stranger had consented to receive. Loving her children passionately, and bringing them up like the sons of princes, she would murmur to herself: "Who knows if the abandoned one has even bread to eat?" If she had only known where he was; if she had only dared inquire!—but she was afraid. Sometimes, too, she would be uneasy about Gaston's jewels, constantly fearing that their hiding-place would be discovered. Other times she would say to herself: "I may as well be tranquil; misfortune has forgotten me." Poor deluded woman! Misfortune is a visitor who sometimes delays his visits, but always comes in the end.

XV

LOUIS DE CLAMERAN, the second son of the marquis, was one of those self-controlled men, who beneath a cool, careless manner, conceal a fiery temperament, and ungovernable passions. Apparently occupied in the pursuit of pleasure, this precocious hypocrite longed for a larger field in which to indulge his evil inclinations, secretly cursing the stern necessity

which chained him down to this dreary country life, and the old chateau, which to him was more gloomy than a prison, and as lifeless as the grave. The paternal authority, though gently exercised, exasperated his rebellious temper. Louis did not love his father, and he hated his brother Gaston. The old marquis, in his culpable thoughtlessness, had kindled this burning envy in the heart of his second son. A strict observer of traditional rights, he had always declared that the eldest son of a noble house should inherit all the family possessions, and that he intended to leave Gaston his entire fortune. Gaston always said that he would never consent to profit by this paternal partiality, but would share equally with his brother. Judging others by himself, Louis placed no faith in this assertion, which he called an ostentatious affectation of generosity. Although this hatred was unsuspected by the marquis and Gaston, it was betrayed by acts significant enough to attract the attention of the servants. They were so fully aware of Louis's sentiments toward his brother that, when the latter was prevented from escaping because of the stumbling horse, they refused to believe it an accident, and muttered under their breath the word: "Fratricide!" A deplorable scene took place between Louis and Jean, who was allowed, on account of his fifty years' faithful service, to take liberties which he sometimes abused by making rough speeches to his superiors.

"It is a great pity," said the old servant, "that a skilful rider like yourself should have fallen at the very moment when your brother's safety depended upon your good horsemanship. La Verdure did not fall." At this broad insinuation, Louis turned pale, and threateningly exclaimed: "You insolent scoundrel, what do you mean?"—"You know well enough what I mean, sir," the old man replied significantly.—"I do not know! Explain yourself."

The servant only answered by a meaning look, which so incensed Louis that he rushed toward him with upraised whip, and would have beaten him unmercifully, had not the other servants interfered, and dragged Jean from the spot. This altercation occurred while Gaston was in the madder-field trying to escape his pursuers. After a while, the gendarmes and hussars returned, with slow tread and sad faces, and announced that Gaston de Clameran had plunged into the Rhone and was most certainly drowned. This melancholy news was received with groans and tears by every one save Louis, who remained

calm and unmoved—not a single muscle of his face quivered; but his eyes sparkled with triumph. A secret voice cried within him: "Now you are assured of the family possessions, and a marquis's coronet."

The corporal of the gendarmes had said: "I would not be the one to tell the poor old man that his son is drowned." Louis felt none of the tender-hearted scruples of the brave old soldier. He instantly went to his father's sick-room, and said, in a firm voice: "Between disgrace and death, my brother has chosen: he is dead."

Like a sturdy oak stricken by lightning, the marquis tottered and fell when these fatal words sounded in his ears. The doctor soon arrived, but, alas! only to say that science was of no avail. Toward daybreak, Louis, without a tear, received his father's last sigh. Louis was now the master. All the unjust precautions taken by the marquis to elude the law, and ensure beyond dispute the possession of his entire fortune to his eldest son, turned against him. By means of a fraudulent deed of trust drawn by his dishonest lawyer, M. de Clameran had disposed everything so that, on the day of his death, every farthing he owned would be Gaston's. It was Louis who benefited by this precaution. He came into possession without even being called upon for the certificate of his brother's death. He was now Marquis de Clameran; he was free, he was comparatively rich. He who had never had twenty-five crowns in his pocket at a time, now found himself the possessor of close upon two hundred thousand francs. This sudden and most unexpected fortune so completely turned his head that he forgot his skilful dissimulation. His demeanor at the funeral of the marquis attracted general notice. He followed the coffin, with his head bowed down and his face buried in a handkerchief; but his looks belied him, his face was beaming, and one could trace a smile beneath the grimaces of his feigned grief. The day after the funeral, Louis sold off everything that could be disposed of—horses, carriages, and family plate. The next day he discharged all the old servants, who had hoped to end their days beneath the hospitable roof of Clameran. Several, with tears in their eyes, took him aside, and entreated him to let them stay, even without wages. He roughly ordered them to be gone. He sent for his father's lawyer, and gave him a power of attorney to sell the estate, and received in return the sum of twenty thousand francs as the first payment in advance. At

the end of the week, he locked up the chateau, with a vow never to enter it again, and left the keys with Jean, who, owning a little house near Clameran, would continue to live in the neighborhood.

Poor Jean! little did he think that, in preventing Valentine from seeing Louis, he had ruined the prospects of his beloved Gaston. On receiving the keys, he asked but one question: "Shall we not search for your brother's body, sir?" he inquired in broken-hearted tones. "And, if it is found, what is to be done with it?"—"I shall leave instructions with my lawyer," answered Louis. And he hurried away from Clameran as if the ground burned his feet. He went to Tarascon, where he had already forwarded his luggage, and took the stage-coach which traveled between Marseilles and Paris, the railroad not then being finished.

At last he was off. The lumbering vehicle rattled along, drawn by six horses; and the deep gullies made by the wheels seemed so many abysses between the past and the future. Lying back in his corner, Louis de Clameran enjoyed in anticipation the pleasures of which he was about to partake. At the end of the journey, Paris appeared before him—radiant, brilliantly dazzling as the sun. There, all ambitions are crowned, all dreams are realized, all passions, all desires, good and evil, are satisfied. In twenty theatres tragedy weeps, or comedy laughs; while at the opera, the most beautiful women in the world, sparkling with diamonds, are ready to die with ecstasy at the sound of divine music; everywhere noise, excitement, luxury, and pleasure. What a dream! The heart of Louis de Clameran was overflowing with desire; and it seemed to him that the horses crawled along like tortoises. What mattered it to him how his father and brother had died? He was young, rich, handsome, and a marquis; he had a constitution of iron; he carried twenty thousand francs in his pocket, and would soon have ten times as many more. He, who had always been poor, regarded this sum as an inexhaustible treasure; and at nightfall, when he jumped from the coach on to the muddy pavement of the brilliantly lighted Paris street, he seemed to be taking possession of the great city, and felt as though he could buy everything in it. His illusions were those common to all young men who, never having been thrown upon their own resources, suddenly come into possession of a patrimony. Imbued with his own importance, accustomed to the deference of

the country people, the young marquis came to Paris with the expectation of being a lion, on account of his name and fortune. To his great surprise, he learned that he possessed nothing which constituted a position in this immense city. He found that in the midst of the busy, indifferent crowd, he was as much lost and unnoticed as a drop of water in a torrent.

But this not very flattering reality could not discourage a man who was determined to gratify his passions at all costs. His ancestral name gained him but one privilege, disastrous for his future; it opened to him the doors of the aristocratic Faubourg St. Germain. There he became acquainted with men of his own age and rank, whose annual incomes almost equaled his entire fortune. Nearly all of them confessed that they only kept up their extravagant style of living by dint of skilful economy behind the scenes, and by regulating their vices and follies as judiciously as a hosier would arrange his Sunday holidays. This information astonished Louis, but did not open his eyes. He endeavored to imitate the dashing style of these economically wasteful young men, without attempting to conform to their prudential rules. He learned how to spend, but not how to reckon as they did. At the club where he was proposed and elected shortly after his arrival, he found several obliging persons who took pleasure in initiating him into the secrets of fashionable life, and correcting any little provincialisms betrayed in his manners and conversation. He profited well and quickly by their lessons. At the end of three months he was fairly launched; his reputation as a skilful gambler was fully established; and he had nobly and gloriously compromised himself with one of the fast women of the day. He had rented handsome apartments in the vicinity of the Madeleine, with a coach-house and stabling for three horses. Although he only furnished this bachelor's establishment with what was absolutely necessary, he found that necessaries were very costly; so that the day he took possession of his apartments, and tried to make up his accounts, he made the startling discovery that his short apprenticeship in Paris had cost him fifty thousand francs, one-fourth of his fortune. And yet he remained, when compared to his brilliant friends, in a state of inferiority which was mortifying to his vanity, like a worthy countryman who strains every nerve to make his nag keep up with thoroughbreds. Fifty thousand francs! For a moment Louis had a slight inclination to retire from the contest. But then, what a

come down! Besides, his vices bloomed and flourished in these charming surroundings. He had heretofore considered himself wonderfully fast, and now a host of new corruptions were revealed to him. Then the sight of suddenly acquired fortunes, and the many examples of the successful results of hazardous ventures, inflamed his mind. He thought that in this great, rich city, he certainly could succeed in securing a share of the loaves and fishes. But how? He had no idea, and he did not seek to find one. He simply persuaded himself that, like many others, he would have his lucky day. In this furious race of self-interest it requires great skill to bestride that capricious mare called opportunity, and ride her to the goal. But Louis did not devote so much thought to the matter. As stupid as the man who expected to win the prize at the lottery without having purchased a ticket, he said to himself: "Pshaw! opportunity—chance—a rich marriage will set me right again!" The rich bride failed to appear, but the turn of the last bank-note arrived. To a pressing demand for money, his notary replied by a refusal. "You have nothing left to sell, sir," he wrote, "with the exception of the chateau. It is no doubt very valuable; but it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a purchaser for so large a building situated as it is now. I will use every effort to secure a purchaser; and, believe me, sir," etc. Louis was thunderstruck at this final catastrophe, as much surprised as if he had not foreseen it. What was he to do? But Louis could not give up the life of ease and pleasure which he had been leading for the past three years. He first of all lived on the reputation of his dissipated fortune—on the credit that remains to the man who has spent much in a short space of time. This resource was soon exhausted. The day came when his creditors seized all they could lay their hands upon—the last remains of his opulence, his carriages, horses, and costly furniture. He retired to a very quiet hotel, but he could not keep away from the wealthy set whom he had considered his friends. He now lived upon them as he had lived upon his tradesmen, borrowing from one louis up to twenty-five, from anybody who would lend to him, and never attempting to repay them. Constantly betting, no one ever saw him pay a wager. He piloted all the novices who fell into his hands, and utilized, in the most shameful services, an experience which had cost him two hundred thousand francs: he was half a courtier, and half an adventurer. His acquaintances did not cut him, but made him cruelly expiate

the favor of being tolerated. No one had the least regard for his feelings, or hesitated to say before him what was thought of his conduct; therefore, whenever alone in his little den, he would give way to fits of violent rage. Envy and covetousness had long since stifled every sentiment of honor and self-respect in him. For a few years of opulence, he felt ready to commit even a crime.

He did not commit a crime, however, but he became mixed up in a disgraceful affair of swindling and extortion. The Comte de Commarin, an old friend of his family, came to his assistance, hushed up the matter, and furnished him with money to take him to England. And what were his means of livelihood in London? The detectives of the most corrupt capital in the world could alone tell us. Descending to the lowest stages of vice, the Marquis de Clameran finally found his level in a society composed of fallen women and of sharpers, whose chances and shameful profits he shared. Compelled to quit London, he traveled about Europe, with no other capital than his audacity, his deep depravity, and his skill at cards. Finally, in 1865, having met a run of good luck at Homburg, he returned to Paris, where he imagined himself entirely forgotten. Eighteen years had passed since he left France. The first step which he took on his return, before even settling himself in Paris, was to make a visit to his old home. Not that he had any relative or even friend in that part of the country, from whom he could expect any assistance; but he remembered the old chateau which his notary had been unable to sell. He thought that perhaps by this time a purchaser had appeared, and he determined to go himself and ascertain the point; he thought, too, that once in the neighborhood, he would always be able to get something for his property, which had cost more than a hundred thousand francs to build.

Three days later, on a beautiful October evening, he reached Tarascon, and there learned that he was still the owner of the chateau. Early the next morning, he set out on to foot to visit the paternal home at Clameran, which he had not seen for twenty-five years. Everything was so changed that he scarcely recognized the locality where he was born, and where he passed his youth; yet the impression was so strong that this man, tried by such varied, strange adventures, for a moment felt like turning back. As Louis advanced, however, the changes appeared less striking; he began to recognize the ground. Soon, through the trees, he distinguished the village steeple, then the village

itself, built upon the gentle slope of a hill, crowned by a wood of olive trees. He recognized the first houses he came to; the farrier's shed, with its roof covered with vine; the old parsonage, and farther on the village inn, where he and Gaston used to play billiards on its primitive table. In spite of what he styled his scorn of vulgar prejudices, a thrill of strange emotion oppressed his heart. He could not overcome a feeling of sadness as scenes of the past rose up before him. How many events had occurred since he last walked along this path, and received a friendly bow and smile from every villager! Then, life appeared to him like a fairy scene in which his every wish was gratified. And now, he returned, dishonored, worn out, disgusted with the realities of life, having tasted the bitter dregs of the cup of shame, stigmatized, poverty-stricken, and friendless, with nothing to lose and nothing to look forward to.

Upon reaching Jean's house, he found the door open; he walked into the immense kitchen, with its monumental fireplace, and rapped on the table. "Coming!" answered a voice from another room. The next moment a man of about forty years appeared in the doorway, and seemed much surprised at finding a stranger in his kitchen. "What do you desire, sir?" he inquired.—"Does not Jean, the Marquis de Clameran's old valet, live here?"—"My father died five years ago, sir," replied the man in a sad tone.

This news affected Louis painfully, as if he had expected the old man to restore him some of his lost youth. He sighed, and said: "I am the Marquis de Clameran." The man, at these words, uttered an exclamation of joy. He seized Louis's hand, and pressing it with respectful affection, cried: "You are the marquis! Alas! why is not my poor father alive to see you? —he would be so happy! He is beneath the sod now, resting after a well-spent life; but I, Joseph, his son, am here to take his place, and devote my life to your service. What an honor it is to have you in my house! Ah! my wife will be so happy to see you; she has all her life heard of the De Clamerans." Here he ran into the garden, and called: "'Toinette! I say, 'Toinette!—Come here quickly!"

This cordial welcome delighted Louis. So many years had gone by since he had been treated with an expression of kindness, or felt the pressure of a friendly hand. In a few moments a handsome, dark-eyed young woman entered the room, and stood blushing with confusion at sight of the stranger. "This

is my wife, sir," said Joseph, leading her toward Louis; "but I have not given her time to put on her finery. This is Monsieur le Marquis, Antoinette." The young wife bowed, and having nothing to say, gracefully uplifted her brow, upon which the marquis pressed a kiss. "You will see the children in a few minutes, Monsieur le Marquis," said Joseph; "I have sent to the school for them."

The worthy couple overwhelmed the marquis with attentions. After so long a walk he must be hungry, they said: he must take a glass of wine now, and lunch would soon be ready; they would be so proud and happy if Monsieur le Marquis would partake of a country lunch. And Joseph went to the cellar after the wine, while 'Toinette ran to catch her fattest pullet. In a short time, Louis sat down to a table laden with the best of everything, waited upon by Joseph and his wife, who watched him with tender interest. The children came running in from school, smeared with the juice of berries. After Louis had embraced them, they stood in a corner and gazed at him with eyes wide open. The important news had spread, and a number of villagers and countrymen appeared at the open door to speak to the Marquis de Clameran.

"I am such a one, Monsieur le Marquis; don't you remember me? Ah! I recognized you at once. The late marquis was very good to me," said an old man. Another asked: "Don't you remember the time when you lent me your gun to go shooting?" Louis welcomed with secret delight all these protestations and proofs of devotion, which had not chilled with time. The kindly voices of these honest people recalled many pleasant moments of the past, and made him feel once more the fresh sensations of his youth. He, the adventurer, the bully, the base accomplice of London swindlers, delighted in these marks of respect and veneration bestowed upon him as the representative of the house of De Clameran; it seemed to make him once more feel a little self-respect. Ah! had he possessed only a quarter of his squandered inheritance, how happy he would have been to peacefully end his days in his native village! But this rest after so many vain excitements, this haven after so many storms and shipwrecks, was denied him. He was penniless. How could he live here when he had nothing to live upon? This knowledge of his pressing need gave him courage to ask Joseph for the keys of the chateau, that he might go and examine it.

"You won't need any key, except the one to the iron gate, Monsieur le Marquis," replied Joseph. It was but too true. Time had done its work, and the lordly chateau of Clameran was nothing but a ruin. The rain and sun had rotted the doors and shutters so that they were crumbling and dilapidated. Here and there were traces of the friendly hands of Jean and his son, who had tried to retard the total ruin of the old chateau; but what use were their efforts? All of the furniture which Louis had not dared to sell stood in the position he left it, but in what a state! All the tapestry hangings and coverings were moth-eaten and in tatters; nothing seemed left but the dust-covered woodwork of the chairs and sofas. Louis was almost afraid to enter the grand, gloomy rooms, where every footfall echoed lugubriously. He almost expected to see the angry old marquis start up from some dark corner, and heap curses on his head for having dishonored the name. His nerves could not bear it, and he hurried out into the open air and sunshine. After a while, he recovered sufficiently to remember the object of his visit.

"Poor Jean was foolish not to make use of the furniture left in the chateau. It is now destroyed without having been of use to any one."—"My father would not have dared to touch anything without permission, Monsieur le Marquis."—"And he was wrong. As for the chateau, it is fast approaching the condition of the furniture. My fortune, I regret to say, does not permit me to repair it; I am, therefore, resolved to sell it while the walls are still standing." Joseph received this information very much as a proposal to commit a sacrilege; but he was not bold of speech, like his father, so he dared not express what he thought.

"Would there be much difficulty in selling these ruins?" continued Louis.—"That depends upon the price you ask, Monsieur le Marquis. I know a man of the neighborhood who would purchase the lot if he could get it cheap."—"Who is he?"—"A person named Fougeroux, who lives on the other side of the Rhone, at Montagnette. He came from Beaucaire, and twelve years ago married a servant-maid of the late Comtesse de la Verberie. Perhaps Monsieur le Marquis remembers her—a plump, bright-eyed brunette, named Mihonne." Louis did not remember Mihonne. "When can we see this Fougeroux?" he inquired.—"At any time, by crossing the Rhone on the ferry."—"Well, let us go now. I am in a hurry."

An entire generation had passed away since Louis had left his old home. It was no longer the old republican sailor, Pilorel, who kept the ferry, but his son. But he also had a respect for tradition; and when he learned the name of the stranger who accompanied Joseph, he hastily got his boat ready, and was soon in the middle of the river with his two passengers. While young Pilorel rowed with all his might, Joseph did his best to warn the marquis against the wily Fougeroux. "He is a cunning fox," said he. "I have had a bad opinion of him ever since his marriage, which was a shameful affair altogether. Mihonne was over fifty years of age, and he was not twenty-five when he married her; so you will understand it was the money, and not the wife, that he wanted. She, poor fool, believed that the young scamp really loved her, and gave herself and her money up to him."—"And he has made good use of it," interrupted Pilorel.

"That is true. Fougeroux is not the man to let the money lie idle. He is now very rich; but he ought, at least, to be thankful to Mihonne for his prosperity. One can easily understand his not feeling any love for her, when she looks like his grandmother; but that he should deprive her of everything and beat her cruelly is shameful."—"He would like to know her six feet under ground," said the ferryman.—"And he will see her there before long. She has been half dead, the poor old woman, ever since Fougeroux brought home a worthless jade, whose servant she has become."

They had reached the opposite shore; Joseph and the marquis asked young Pilorel to await their return, and then took the road to Montagnette. They soon arrived at a well-cultivated farm, and Joseph, having inquired for the master, a farm boy said that "M. Fougeroux" was out in the fields, but he would send for him. He soon appeared. He was a very little man, with a red beard, and restless sunken eyes. Although M. Fougeroux professed to despise the nobility and the clergy, the hope of driving a good bargain made him servilely obsequious. He hastened to usher Louis into "his parlor," with many bows and endless repetitions of "Monsieur le Marquis." Upon entering the room, he roughly ordered the old woman, who was crouching over some dying embers, to make haste and bring some wine for Monsieur the Marquis de Clameran. At this name, the old woman started as if she had received an electric shock. She opened her mouth to say something, but

a look from her tyrant froze the words upon her lips. With a wild air, she hobbled out to obey his orders, and in a few minutes returned with a bottle of wine and three glasses. Then she resumed her seat by the fire, and kept her eyes fastened upon the marquis. Could this really be the plump and merry Mihonne, who had been the confidante of the little fairy of La Verberie? Only those who have lived in the country know what time and worry can do to a woman.

The bargain, meanwhile, was being discussed between Joseph and Fougeroux. The dealer offered a ridiculously small sum for the chateau, saying that he would only buy it to pull down and sell the materials. Joseph enumerated the beams, joists, ironwork, and the ground. As for Mihonne, the sight of the marquis was an event in her existence. If the faithful servant had hitherto never breathed a word of the secrets confided to her probity, they had seemed to her none the less heavy to bear. After marrying, and being so harshly treated that she daily prayed for death to come to her relief, she began to blame everybody but herself for her misfortunes. Having no child, after having ardently longed for one, she was persuaded that God had stricken her with barrenness for having assisted in the abandonment of an innocent, helpless babe. She often thought that by revealing everything she might appease the wrath of Heaven, and once more bring happiness to her home. Nothing but her love for Valentine gave her strength to resist this constant temptation. But to-day the sight of Louis decided her. She thought there could be no danger in confiding in Gaston's brother. The bargain was at length struck. It was agreed that Fougeroux should give five thousand two hundred and eighty francs in cash for the chateau and land attached; and Joseph was to have the remains of the furniture. The marquis and the dealer shook hands as they uttered the final word: "Agreed!" and Fougeroux at once went himself to get a bottle of extra good wine with which to seal the bargain.

The occasion was favorable to Mihonne. She walked quickly over to where the Marquis sat, and said in a nervous whisper: "Monsieur le Marquis, I must speak with you alone."—"With me, my good woman?"—"With you. It is a secret of life and death. This evening, at dusk, meet me under the walnut trees over there, and I will tell you everything." Hearing her husband's footsteps, she hastened back to her seat. Fougeroux gaily filled the glasses, and drank De Clameran's health.

As they returned to the boat, Louis debated within himself whether he should keep this singular appointment. "Joseph, what the deuce can that old witch want with me?" he asked.—"Who can tell? She used to be in the service of a lady who was M. Gaston's mistress, so my father used to say. If I were in your place, sir, I would go. You can dine at my place, and after dinner Pilorel will row you over."

Curiosity decided Louis; and about seven o'clock he arrived under the walnut trees, where old Mihonne had already been waiting a long time. "Ah! here you are at last, my dear, good sir," she said in a tone of joy. "I was beginning to despair."—"Yes, here I am, my good woman; what have you to tell me?"—"Ah! many things, Monsieur le Marquis. But first, tell me have you heard from your brother." Louis almost regretted having come, supposing that the old woman was wandering. "You know well enough that my poor brother was drowned in the Rhone."—"Good heavens!" cried Mihonne, "are you ignorant, then, of his escape? Yes, he did what will never be done again: he swam across the swollen Rhone. The next day Mademoiselle Valentine went to Clameran to tell the news; but Jean prevented her seeing you. Afterward I took a letter for you, but you had left."

These revelations, after twenty years, confounded Louis. "Are you sure you are not mistaking your dreams for real events, my good woman?" he asked gently.—"No," replied Mihonne, mournfully shaking her head. "If old Menoul were alive, he would tell you how he took charge of M. Gaston until he embarked at Marseilles. But that is nothing compared to the rest. M. Gaston has a son."—"My brother, a son! Really, you are out of your mind."—"Alas! no, unfortunately for my happiness in this world and in the world to come. He had a son, and Mademoiselle Valentine was the mother. I received the poor babe in my arms and carried it to a woman abroad, who was paid to take charge of it."

Then Mihonne told everything—the comtesse's anger, the journey to London, and the desertion of little Raoul. With the accurate memory natural to people unable to read and write, she related the most minute particulars—the names of the village and the farmer's wife, the child's Christian and surname, and the exact date of everything which had occurred. Then she told of Valentine's sufferings after her fault, of the impending ruin of the comtesse, and, finally, of the poor girl's marriage

with a gentleman from Paris, who was so rich that he did not know the extent of his fortune, a banker named Fauvel. A piercing and prolonged cry here interrupted the old woman. "Heavens!" she exclaimed in a frightened voice, "that is my husband calling me," and she hurried back to the farmhouse as fast as her trembling limbs could carry her.

For several minutes after her departure, Louis stood rooted to the spot. Her recital had filled his wicked mind with an idea so infamous, so detestable, that even his vile nature shrank for a moment from its enormity. He knew the rich banker by reputation, and was calculating the advantages he might gain by the strange information of which he was now possessed. The few faint scruples he felt were silenced by the prospect of an old age spent in poverty. "But first of all," he thought, "I must ascertain the truth of the old woman's story; then I will decide upon a plan." This was why, two days later, having received the five thousand two hundred and eighty francs from Fougeroux, Louis de Clameran set out for London.

XVI

DURING the twenty years of her married life, Valentine had experienced but one real sorrow; and this was one which, in the course of nature, must happen sooner or later. In 1859 her mother died from inflammation of the lungs, during one of her frequent journeys to Paris. The comtesse preserved her faculties to the last, and with her dying breath said to her daughter: "Ah, well! was I not right in prevailing upon you to bury the past? Your silence has made my old age peaceful and happy, for which I now thank you, and it assures you a quiet future."

Madame Fauvel constantly said that, since the loss of her mother, she had never had cause to shed a tear. And what more could she wish for? As years rolled on, Andre's love remained the same as it had been during the first days of their union. To the love that had not diminished was added that sweet intimacy which results from long conformity of ideas and

unbounded confidence. Everything prospered with this happy couple. Andre was far more wealthy than he had ever hoped to be, even in his wildest visions; more so even than he or Valentine desired. Their two sons, Lucian and Abel, were beautiful as their mother, noble-hearted and intelligent young men, whose honorable characters and graceful bearing were the glory of their family. Nothing was wanting to insure Valentine's felicity. When her husband and her sons were absent, her solitude was cheered by the companionship of an accomplished young girl, whom she loved as her own daughter, and who in return filled the place of a devoted child. Madeleine was M. Fauvel's niece, who, when an infant, had lost both parents, poor but very worthy people. Valentine adopted the babe, perhaps in memory of the poor little creature who had been abandoned to strangers. It seemed to her that God would bless her for this good action, and that Madeleine would be the guardian angel of the house. The day of the little orphan's arrival, M. Fauvel invested for her ten thousand francs, which he presented to Madeleine as her dowry. The banker amused himself by increasing these ten thousand francs in the most marvelous ways. He, who never ventured upon a rash speculation with his own money, always invested his niece's in the most hazardous schemes, and was always so successful that, at the end of fifteen years, the ten thousand francs had become half a million. People were right when they said that the Fauvel family were to be envied. Time had dulled Valentine's remorse and anxiety. In the genial atmosphere of a happy home, she had almost found forgetfulness and a peaceful conscience. She had suffered so much at being compelled to deceive Andre that she hoped she was now at quits with fate. She began to look forward to the future, and her youth seemed but buried in an impenetrable mist, the memory of a painful dream.

Yes, she believed herself saved, when, one rainy day in November, during an absence of her husband's, who had gone into the provinces on business, one of the servants brought her a letter, which had been left by a stranger, who refused to give his name. Without the faintest presentiment of evil she carelessly broke the seal, and read:

"MADAME—Would it be relying too much upon the memories of the past to hope for half an hour of your time? To-morrow,

between two and three, I will do myself the honor of calling upon you. MARQUIS DE CLAMERAN."

Fortunately, Madame Fauvel was alone. Trembling like a leaf, she read the letter over and over again, as if to convince herself that she was not the victim of a horrible hallucination. Half a dozen times, with a sort of terror, she whispered that name once so dear—Clameran! spelling it aloud as if it were a strange name which she could not pronounce. And the eight letters forming the name seemed to shine like the lightning which precedes the thunderbolt. Ah! she had hoped and believed that the fatal past was atoned for, and buried in oblivion; and now it suddenly stood before her, pitiless and threatening. It was in this hour of security when she imagined herself pardoned, that the storm was to burst upon the fragile edifice of her happiness, and destroy her every hope. A long time passed before she could collect her scattered thoughts sufficiently to reflect upon a course of action. Then she began to think she was foolish to be so frightened. This letter was written by Gaston, of course, therefore she need feel no apprehension. Gaston had returned to France, and wished to see her. She could understand this desire, and she knew too well this man, upon whom she had lavished her young affection, to attribute any bad motives to his visit. He would come, and finding her the wife of another, the mother of a family, they would exchange thoughts of the past, perhaps a few regrets; she would restore the jewels which she had faithfully kept for him, and—that would be all. But one distressing doubt beset her agitated mind. Should she conceal from Gastone the birth of his son? To confess was to expose herself to many dangers. It was placing herself at the mercy of a man—a loyal, honorable man, to sure—confiding to him not only her own honor and happiness, but the honor of her husband and her sons. Still, silence would be a crime. After abandoning her child, and depriving him of a mother's care and affection, she would rob him of his father's name and fortune.

She was still undecided when the servant announced dinner. But she had not the courage to meet the glances of her sons. She sent word that she was not well, and would not be down to dinner. For the first time in her life she rejoiced at her husband's absence. Madeleine came hurrying into her aunt's room to see what was the matter; but Valentine dismissed her,

saying she would try to sleep off her indisposition. She wished to be alone in her trouble, and her mind tried to imagine what the morrow would bring forth. This dreaded morrow soon came. She counted the hours until two o'clock; then she counted the minutes. At half-past two the servant announced: "Monsieur the Marquis de Clameran."

Madame Fauvel had promised herself to be calm, even cold. During a long, sleepless night, she had mentally arranged beforehand every detail of this painful meeting. She had even decided upon what she should say. But, at the dreaded moment, her strength gave way; a frightful emotion fixed her to her seat; she could neither speak nor think. He, however, bowed respectfully, and remained waiting in the middle of the room. He appeared about fifty years of age, with iron-gray hair and mustache, and a cold, severe cast of countenance; his expression was of haughty severity as he stood there in his full suit of black. The agitated woman tried to discover in his face some traces of the man whom she had so madly loved, who had pressed her to his heart—the father of her son; and she was surprised to find in the person before her no resemblance to the youth whose memory had haunted her life—no, nothing. At length, as he continued to remain motionless, she faintly murmured: "Gaston!"

But he, shaking his head, replied: "I am not Gaston, madame; my brother succumbed to the misery and suffering of exile. I am Louis de Clameran." What! it was not Gaston, then, who had written to her—it was not Gaston who stood before her? She trembled with terror; her head whirled, and her eyes grew dim. What, then, could this man want—this brother in whom Gaston had never cared to confide? A thousand probabilities, each one more terrible than the other, flashed across her brain. Yet she succeeded in overcoming her weakness, so that Louis scarcely perceived it.

Pointing to a chair, she said to Louis with affected indifference: "Will you be kind enough, then, sir, to explain the object of this most unexpected visit?" The marquis, seeming not to notice this sudden change of manner, took a seat without removing his eyes from Madame Fauvel's face. "First of all, madame," he began, "I must ask if we can be overheard by any one?"—"Why this question? You can have nothing to say to me that my husband and children should not hear." Louis shrugged his shoulders, and said: "Be good enough to answer

me, madame; not for my sake, but for your own."—"Speak, then, sir, you will not be heard."

In spite of this assurance, the marquis drew his chair close to the sofa where Madame Fauvel sat, so as to speak in a very low tone, as if almost afraid to hear his own voice. "As I told you, madame," he resumed, "Gaston is dead; and it was I who closed his eyes, and received his last wishes. Do you understand?" The poor woman understood only too well, but was racking her brain to discover what could be the purpose of this fatal visit. Perhaps it was only to claim Gaston's jewels.—"It is unnecessary to recall," continued Louis, "the painful circumstances which blasted my brother's life. However happy your own lot has been, you can not entirely have forgotten that friend of your youth who, unhesitatingly, sacrificed himself in defense of your honor." Not a muscle of Madame Fauvel's face moved; she appeared to be trying to recall the circumstances to which Louis alluded.—"Have you forgotten, madame?" he asked with bitterness. "Then I must try and explain myself more clearly. A long, long time ago you loved my unfortunate brother."—"Sir!"—"Ah, it is useless to deny it, madame. I told you that Gaston confided everything to me—*everything,*" he added significantly.

But Madame Fauvel was not frightened by this information. This "everything" could not be of any importance, for Gaston had gone abroad in total ignorance of her secret. She rose, and said with an apparent assurance she was far from feeling: "You forget, sir, that you are speaking to a woman who is now advanced in life, who is married, and who is the mother of a family. If your brother loved me, it was his affair, and not yours. If, young and ignorant, I was led into imprudence, it is not your place to remind me of it. He would not have done so. This past which you evoke I buried in oblivion twenty years ago."

"Then you have forgotten all that happened?"—"Absolutely all."—"Even your child, madame?" This question, accompanied by one of those looks which penetrate the innermost recesses of the soul, fell upon Madame Fauvel like a thunderbolt. She dropped, tremblingly, into her seat, murmuring: "He knows! How did he discover it?" Had her own happiness alone been at stake, she would have instantly thrown herself upon De Clameran's mercy. But she had her family to defend, and the consciousness of this gave her strength to resist him. "Do you wish to insult me, sir?" she asked.

"It is true, then, you have forgotten Valentine Raoul?" She saw that this man did indeed know all. How? It little mattered. He certainly knew; but she determined to deny everything, even in the face of the most positive proofs, if he should produce them. She thought it best to find out what he was driving at. "Well," she asked, with a forced laugh, "what is it you want?"

"Listen, madame. Two years ago the vicissitudes of exile took my brother to London. There, at the house of a friend, he met a young man bearing the name of Raoul. Gaston was so struck by the youth's appearance and intelligence, that he inquired who he was, and discovered that beyond a doubt this boy was his son, and your son, madame."—"This is quite a romance you are relating."—"Yes, madame, a romance, the denouement of which is in your hands. The comtesse, your mother, certainly used every precaution to conceal your secret; but the best-laid plans always have some weak point. After your departure, one of your mother's London friends came to the village where you had been staying. This lady pronounced your real name before the farmer's wife who was bringing up the child. Thus everything was revealed. My brother wished for proofs, he procured the most positive, the most unobjectionable." He stopped and closely watched Madame Fauvel's face to see the effect of his words. To his astonishment she betrayed not the slightest agitation or alarm; she was smiling. "Well, what next?" she asked carelessly.

"Then, madame, Gaston acknowledged the child. But the De Clamerans are poor; my brother died in a lodging-house, and I have only an annuity of twelve hundred francs to live upon. What is to become of Raoul, alone without relations or friends to assist him? This anxiety embittered my brother's last moments."—"Really, sir—" "I will conclude," interrupted Louis. "It was then that Gaston opened his heart to me. He told me to seek you. 'Valentine,' said he, 'Valentine will remember; she will not allow our son to want for everything, even bread; she is wealthy, very wealthy; I die in peace.'"

Madame Fauvel rose from her seat, evidently with the intention of dismissing her visitor. "You must confess, sir," she said, "that I have shown great patience."—This imperturbable assurance amazed Louis so much that he did not reply.—"I do not deny," she continued, "that I at one time possessed the confidence of M. Gaston de Clameran. I will prove it to you by

restoring to you your mother's jewels, with which he entrusted me at the time of his departure." While speaking she took from beneath the sofa-cushion the bag of jewels, and handed it to Louis. "Here they are, sir," she added; "permit me to express my surprise that your brother never asked me for them."—Had he been less master of himself, Louis would have shown how great was his surprise. "I was told," he said sharply, "not to mention this matter."

Madame Fauvel, without making any reply, laid her hand on the bell-rope. "You will allow me, sir," she said, "to end this interview, which was only granted for the purpose of placing in your hands these precious jewels."—Thus dismissed, M. de Clameran was obliged to take his leave without attaining his object. "As you will, madame," he said; "I leave you; but before doing so I must tell you the rest of my brother's dying injunctions: 'If Valentine disregards the past, and refuses to provide for our son, I enjoin upon you to compel her to do her duty.' Meditate upon these words, madame, for what I have sworn to do, upon my honor, shall be done!"

At last Madame Fauvel was alone. She could give vent to her despair. Exhausted by her efforts at self-restraint during De Clameran's presence, she felt weary and crushed in body and spirit. She had scarcely strength to drag herself up to her bed-chamber and to lock the door. Now there was no room for doubt; her fears had become realities. She could fathom the abyss into which she was about to be hurled, and knew that in her fall she would drag her family with her. God alone, in this hour of danger, could help her, could save her from destruction. She prayed. "Oh, God," she cried, "punish me, for I am very guilty, and I will evermore adore Thy chastising hand. Punish me, for I have been a bad daughter, an unworthy mother, and a perfidious wife. In Thy just anger spare the innocent; have pity on my husband and my children!" Ah, why did she listen to her mother? Why did she hold her tongue? Hope had fled forever. This man who had left her presence with a threat upon his lips would return; she knew it well. What answer could she give him? To-day she had succeeded in subduing her heart and conscience; would she again have the strength to master her feelings? She well knew that her calmness and courage were entirely due to De Clameran's unskilfulness. Why did he not use entreaties instead of threats? When Louis spoke of Raoul, she could scarcely

conceal her emotion; her maternal heart yearned toward the innocent child who was expiating his mother's faults. A chill of horror passed over her at the idea of his enduring the pangs of hunger. Her child wanting bread, when she, his mother, was rolling in wealth! With what delight would she undergo the greatest privations for his sake! If she could but send him enough money to support him comfortably! But no; she could not take this step without compromising herself and her family. Prudence forbade her acceptance of Louis de Clameran's intervention. To confide in him was placing herself, and all she held dear, at his mercy, and this inspired her with instinctive terror. Then she began to ask herself if he had really spoken the truth. In thinking over Louis's story, it seemed improbable and disconnected. If Gaston had been living in Paris, in the poverty described by his brother, why had he not demanded of the married woman the deposit entrusted to the maiden? Why, when anxious about their child's future, had he not come to her, since he believed her to be so rich that, on his deathbed, it was she he relied upon. A thousand vague apprehensions beset her mind; she felt suspicion and distrust of every one and everything. She was aware that a decisive step would bind her forever, and then, what would not be exacted of her? For a moment she thought of throwing herself at her husband's feet and confessing all. She pictured to herself the mortification and sorrow that her noble-hearted husband would suffer upon discovering, after a lapse of twenty years, how shamefully he had been deceived. Having been deceived from the very first, would he not believe that it had been so ever since? Would he believe in her fidelity as a wife when he discovered her perfidy as a young girl? She understood Andre well enough to know that he would say nothing, and would use every means to conceal the scandal. But his domestic happiness would be gone forever. He would forsake his home; his sons would shun her presence, and every family bond would be severed. She thought of ending her doubts by suicide; but her death would not silence her implacable enemy, who, not able to disgrace her while alive, would dishonor her memory.

Fortunately, the banker was still absent; and during the two days succeeding Louis's visit Madame Fauvel was able to keep to her room under pretense of illness. But Madeleine, with her feminine instinct, saw that her aunt was troubled by

something worse than the nervous attack for which the physician was prescribing all sorts of remedies. She noticed, too, that this sudden illness seemed to have been caused by the visit of a stern-looking stranger, who had been closeted for a long time with her aunt. Madeleine felt so sure that something was wrong, that, on the second day, seeing Madame Fauvel more anxious still, she ventured to say: "What makes you so sad, dear aunt? Tell me, shall I ask our good priest to come and see you?" With a sharpness foreign to her nature, which was gentleness itself, Madame Fauvel refused to listen to her niece's suggestion. What Louis calculated upon happened. After long reflection, not seeing any issue to her deplorable situation, Madame Fauvel little by little determined to yield. By consenting to all, she had a chance of saving everything. She well knew that to act thus was to prepare a life of torture for herself; but she alone would be the victim, and, at any rate, she would be gaining time. In the mean time, M. Fauvel had returned home, and Valentine resumed her accustomed ways. But she was no longer the happy mother and devoted wife, whose smiling presence was wont to fill the house with sunshine and comfort. She was beset by the most frightful anxieties. Hearing nothing of De Clameran, she expected to see him appear, so to say, at any moment; trembling at every ring of the bell, turning pale whenever the door opened, and not daring to leave the house, for fear he should come during her absence. De Clameran did not come; he wrote, or rather, as he was too prudent to furnish arms which could be used against himself, he had a note written, which Madame Fauvel alone might understand, in which he said that, being ill, he begged she would excuse his being obliged to make an appointment with her for the next day at the Hotel du Louvre. The letter was almost a relief to Madame Fauvel. Anything was preferable to suspense. She was ready to consent to everything. She burned the letter, and said to herself: "I will go."

The next day, toward the appointed time, she dressed herself in the plainest of her black dresses, in the bonnet which concealed her face the most, placed a thick veil in her pocket, and started forth. It was not until she found herself a considerable distance from her home that she ventured to hail a cab, which soon set her down at the Hotel du Louvre. Her circle of acquaintances being large, she was in terror of being recognized. What would her friends think, if they saw her at the Hotel du

Louvre dressed as she was? Any one would naturally suspect an intrigue, a rendezvous; and her character would be ruined forever. This was the first time since her marriage that she had had occasion for mystery; and, in her inexperience, her efforts to escape notice were in every way calculated to attract attention. The concierge said that the Marquis de Clameran's room was on the third floor. She hurried up the stairs, glad to escape the scrutinizing glances which she imagined were fixed upon her; but, in spite of the minute directions given by the concierge, she lost her way in the immense hotel, and for a long time wandered about the interminable corridors. Finally, she found a door bearing the number sought—317. She stood leaning against the wall with her hand pressed to her throbbing heart, which seemed ready to burst. The sight of a stranger traversing the corridor ended her hesitations. With a trembling hand she knocked at the door. "Come in," said a voice. She entered. But it was not the Marquis de Clameran who stood in the middle of the room, it was quite a young man, almost a youth, who looked at her with a singular expression. Madame Fauvel thought that she had mistaken the room. "Excuse me, sir," she said, blushing deeply: "I thought that this was the Marquis de Clameran's room."

"It is his room, madame," replied the young man; then seeing she was silent, and about to leave, he added: "I presume I have the honor of addressing Madame Fauvel?" She nodded affirmatively, shuddering at the sound of her own name, and frightened at this proof of De Clameran's betrayal of her secret to a stranger. With visible anxiety she awaited an explanation. "Fear nothing, madame," resumed the young man: "you are as safe here as if you were in your own drawing-room. M. de Clameran desired me to make his excuses; you will not see him."—"But, sir, from an urgent letter sent by him yesterday, I was led to suppose—I inferred—"

"When he wrote to you, madame, he had projects in view which he has since renounced forever."

Madame Fauvel was too surprised, too agitated to think clearly. Beyond the present she could see nothing. "Do you mean," she asked with distrust, "that he has changed his intentions?" The young man's face was expressive of sad compassion, as if he shared the unhappy woman's sufferings. "The marquis has renounced," he said in a melancholy tone, "what he wrongly considered a sacred duty. Believe me, he hesitated

a long time before he could decide to apply to you on a subject painful to you both. You repelled him, you were obliged to refuse to hear him. He knew not what imperious reasons dictated your conduct. Blinded by unjust anger, he swore to obtain by threats what you refused to give him voluntarily. Resolved to attack your domestic happiness, he had collected overwhelming proofs against you. Pardon him: an oath given to his dying brother bound him." He took from the mantelpiece a bundle of papers through which he glanced as he continued speaking: "These proofs that can not be denied, I now hold in my hand. This is the certificate of the Rev. Mr. Sedley; this the declaration of Mrs. Dobbin, the farmer's wife; and these others are the statements of the physician and of several persons who were acquainted with Madame de la Verberie during her stay near London. Not a single link is missing. I had great difficulty in getting these papers away from M. de Clameran. Perhaps he had a suspicion of my intentions. This, madame, is what I intended doing with these proofs."

With a rapid motion he threw the bundle of papers into the fire, where they blazed up, and, in a moment, nothing remained of them but a little heap of ashes. "All is now destroyed, madame," he resumed, his eyes sparkling with the most generous resolutions. "The past, if you desire it, is as completely annihilated as those papers. If any one, hereafter, dares accuse you of having had a son before your marriage, treat him as a vile calumniator. There are no longer any proofs; you are free."

Madame Fauvel began to understand the sense of this scene —the truth dawned upon her bewildered mind. This noble youth, who protected her from De Clameran's anger, who restored her peace of mind and the exercise of her own free will, by destroying all proofs of her past, who in fact saved her, was, must be, the child whom she had abandoned—Valentine Raoul. At this moment she forgot everything. Maternal tenderness, so long restrained, now welled up and overflowed as, in a scarcely audible voice, she murmured: "Raoul!" At this name, uttered in so thrilling a tone, the young man staggered, as if overcome by an unhoped-for happiness. "Yes, Raoul," he cried; "Raoul, who would rather die a thousand times than cause his mother the slightest pain; Raoul, who would shed his life's blood to spare her one tear."

She made no attempt to struggle or resist; all her body trembled as she recognized her first-born. She opened her

arms, and Raoul sprang into them, saying, in a choked voice: "Mother! my dear mother! Bless you for this first kiss!" Alas! this was the sad truth. This dear son she had never seen before. He had been taken from her, despite her prayers and tears, without a mother's embrace; and this kiss she had just given him was indeed the first. But joy so great, following upon so much anguish, was more than the excited mother could bear; she sank back in her chair almost fainting, and, with a sort of meditative rapture, gazed in an eager way upon her long-lost son, who was now kneeling at her feet. With her hand she stroked his soft curls; she admired his white forehead, pure as a young girl's, and his large, trembling eyes; and she hungered after his red lips.

"Oh, mother!" he said; "words can not describe my feelings when I heard that my uncle had dared to threaten you. Ah! when my father told him to apply to you, he was no longer in his right mind. I have known you for a long, long time. Often have my father and I hovered around your happy home to catch a glimpse of you through the window. When you passed by in your carriage, he would say to me: 'There is your mother, Raoul!' To look upon you was our greatest joy. When we knew you were going to a ball, we would wait near the door to see you enter, beautiful and adored. How often, in the depth of winter, have I raced with your fast horses, to admire you till the last moment!"

Tears—the sweetest tears she had ever shed—coursed down Madame Fauvel's cheeks, as she listened to the musical tones of Raoul's voice. This voice was so like Gaston's that it recalled to her the fresh and adorable sensations of her youth. She seemed to live over again those early stolen meetings—to feel once more the beatings of her virgin heart. It seemed as though nothing had happened since Gaston folded her in his fond embrace. Andre, her two sons, Madeleine—all were forgotten in this new-found affection.

Raoul went on to say: "Only yesterday I learned that my uncle had been to demand for me a few crumbs of your wealth. Why did he take such a step? I am poor, it is true—very poor; but I am too familiar with poverty to be frightened by it. I have a clear brain and willing hands—they will earn me a living. You are very rich, I have been told. What is that to me? Keep all your fortune, my darling mother; but give me a corner in your heart. Let me love you. Promise me that

this first kiss shall not be the last. No one will ever know; be not afraid. I shall be able to hide my happiness."

And Madame Fauvel had dreaded this son! Ah! how bitterly did she now reproach herself for not having sooner flown to meet him. She questioned him regarding the past; she wished to know how he had lived—what he had been doing. He replied that he had nothing to conceal; his existence had been that of every poor man's child. The farmer's wife who had brought him up had always treated him with affection. She had even given him an education superior to his condition in life, and rather beyond her means, because she thought him so handsome and intelligent. When about sixteen years of age, she procured him a situation in a banking-house; and he was commencing to earn his own living, when one day a stranger came to him, and said: "I am your father," and took him away with him. Since then nothing was wanting to his happiness, save a mother's tenderness. He had suffered but one great sorrow, and that was the day when Gaston de Clameran—his father—had died in his arms. "But now," he said, "all is forgotten. Have I been unhappy? I no longer know, since I see you—since I love you."

Madame Fauvel was oblivious of the lapse of time, but fortunately Raoul was on the watch. "Why, it is seven o'clock!" he suddenly exclaimed. This exclamation brought Madame Fauvel abruptly back to the reality. Seven o'clock! What would her family think of this long absence? "Shall I see you again, mother?" asked Raoul, as they were about to separate—"Oh, yes!" she replied, fondly; "yes, often, every day, tomorrow."

But now for the first time since her marriage, Madame Fauvel perceived that she was not mistress of her actions. Never before had she had occasion to wish for uncontrolled liberty. She left her heart and soul behind her in the room of the Hotel du Louvre, where she had just found her son. She was compelled to leave him, to undergo the intolerable agony of composing her face to conceal this great happiness, which had changed her whole life and being. Having some difficulty in procuring a cab, it was more than half-past seven when she reached the Rue de Provence, where she found the family waiting dinner for her. She thought her husband silly, and even vulgar, when he joked her upon being late. So strange are the sudden effects of a new passion, that she regarded al-

most with contempt this unbounded confidence he reposed in her. And she, ordinarily so timorous, replied to his jest with imperturbable calmness, almost without an effort. So intoxicating had been her sensations while with Raoul that in her joy she was incapable of desiring anything else—of dreaming of aught save the renewal of those delightful emotions. No longer was she a devoted wife—an incomparable mother. She scarcely thought of her two sons. They had always been happy and beloved. They had a father—they were rich; while the other, the other! oh, how much reparation was owing to him! In her blindness, she almost regarded her family as responsible for Raoul's sufferings. No remorse for the past, no apprehensions for the future, disturbed her conscience. To her the future was to-morrow; eternity—the sixteen hours which separated her from another interview. To her, Gaston's death seemed to absolve the past as well as the present. But she regretted she was married. Free, she could have consecrated herself exclusively to Raoul. She was rich, but how gladly would she have sacrificed her affluence to enjoy poverty with him! Neither her husband nor sons would ever suspect the thoughts which absorbed her mind; but she dreaded her niece. She imagined that Madeleine looked at her strangely on her return home. Did she suspect something. For several days she had asked embarrassing questions. She must beware of her.

This uneasiness changed the affection which Madame Fauvel had hitherto felt for her adopted daughter into positive dislike. She, so kind and loving, regretted having placed over herself a vigilant spy from whom nothing escaped. She pondered what means she could take to avoid the penetrating watchfulness of a girl who was accustomed to read in her face every thought that crossed her mind. With unspeakable satisfaction she thought of a way which she imagined would please all parties. During the last two years the banker's cashier and protege, Prosper Bertomy, had been devoted in his attentions to Madeleine. Madame Fauvel decided to do all in her power to hasten matters, so that, Madeleine once married and out of the house, there would be no one to criticize her own movements. That very evening, with a duplicity of which she would have been incapable a few days before, she began to question Madeleine about her sentiments toward Prosper.

"Ah, ah, mademoiselle," she said gaily, "is it thus you per-

mit yourself to choose a husband without my permission."—"But, aunt! I thought you—"—"Yes, I know; you thought I had suspected the true state of affairs? That is precisely what I had done." Then, in a serious tone, she added: "Therefore, nothing remains but to obtain the consent of Master Prosper. Do you think he will grant it?"—"He! aunt. Ah! if he only dared—"—"Ah, indeed! you seem to know all about it, mademoiselle."

Madeleine, blushing and confused, hung her head, and said nothing. Madame Fauvel drew her toward her, and continued in her most affectionate voice: "My dear child, do not be distressed. Did you think that Prosper would have been so warmly welcomed by your uncle and myself, had we not approved of him in every respect?"

Madeleine threw her arms round her aunt's neck, and murmured: "Oh, thank you, my dear aunt, thank you; you are kind, you love me!" Madame Fauvel said to herself: "I will make Andre speak to Prosper, and before two months are over the marriage can take place."

Unfortunately, Madame Fauvel was so engrossed by her new passion, which did not leave her a moment for reflection, that she put off this project. Spending a portion of each day at the Hotel du Louvre with Raoul, she did not cease devoting her thoughts to insuring him an independent fortune and a good position. She had not yet ventured to speak to him on the subject. She imagined that she had discovered in him all his father's noble pride and sensitiveness. She anxiously wondered if he would ever accept the least assistance from her. The Marquis de Clameran quieted her doubts on this point. She had frequently met him since the day on which he had so frightened her, and to her first aversion had succeeded a secret sympathy. She felt kindly toward him for the affection he lavished on her son. If Raoul, with the heedlessness of youth, mocked at the future, Louis, the man of the world, seemed very anxious about his nephew's welfare. So that, one day, after a few general observations, he approached this serious question: "The pleasant life my nephew leads is all very well," he commenced, "but would it not be prudent for him to seek some employment? He has no fortune."—"Ah, my dear uncle, do let me enjoy my present happiness. What is the use of any change? What do I want?"—"You want for nothing at present, Raoul; but when your resources are exhausted, and mine

too—which will be in a short time—what will become of you?" "Oh! I will enter the army. All the De Clamerans are born soldiers; and if a war breaks out—"

Madame Fauvel laid her hand upon his lips, and said in a reproachful tone: "Cruel boy! become a soldier? Would you, then, deprive me of the joy of seeing you?"—"No, mother dear; no."—"You see," insisted Louis, "that you must listen to us." —"I am quite willing; but some other time. I will work and earn no end of money."—"How, poor foolish boy? What can you do?"—"Oh! never mind. I don't know how; but set your mind at rest, I will find a way."

Finding it impossible to make this self-sufficient youth listen to reason, Louis and Madame Fauvel, after discussing the matter fully, decided that assistance must be forced upon him. It was difficult, however, to choose a profession; and De Clameran thought it prudent to wait a while, and study the bent of the young man's mind. In the mean while, it was decided that Madame Fauvel should place funds at the marquis's disposal for Raoul's support. Regarding Gaston's brother in the light of a father to her child, Madame Fauvel soon found him indispensable. She continually wanted to see him, either to consult him concerning some new idea which occurred to her, or to impress upon him some good advice to be given. Thus she was well pleased when one day he requested the honor of being allowed to call upon her at her own house. Nothing was easier than to introduce the Marquis de Clameran to her husband as an old friend of her family; and, after once being admitted, he could soon become an intimate acquaintance. Madame Fauvel soon had reason to congratulate herself upon this arrangement. Unable to continue to go to Raoul every day, and not daring, if she wrote to him, to receive his replies, she obtained news of him through Louis.

For about a month things went on smoothly, when one day the marquis confessed that Raoul was giving him a great deal of trouble. His hesitating, embarrassed manner frightened Madame Fauvel. She thought something had happened, and that he was trying to break the bad news gently. "What is the matter?" she asked.—"I am sorry to say," replied De Clameran, "that this young man has inherited all the pride and passions of his ancestors. He is one of those natures who stop at nothing, who find incitement in opposition; and I can think of no way of checking him in his mad career."—"Merciful

heaven! what has he been doing?"—"Nothing particularly censurable, nothing irreparable, certainly; but I am afraid of the future. He is still unaware of the liberal allowance which you have placed in my hands for his benefit; he thinks that I support him, and yet he throws away money as if he were the son of a millionaire."

Like all mothers, Madame Fauvel attempted to excuse her son. "Perhaps you are a little severe," she said. "Poor child, he has suffered so much! He has undergone so many privations during his childhood, that this sudden happiness and wealth has turned his head; he seizes on pleasure as a starving man seizes on a piece of bread. Is it so surprising? Ah, only have patience, and he will soon return to the path of duty; he has a good heart." "He has suffered so much!" was Madame Fauvel's constant excuse for Raoul. This was her invariable reply to M. de Clameran's complaints of his nephew's conduct. And, having once commenced, he was now constant in his accusations against Raoul. "Nothing restrains his extravagance and dissipation," Louis would say in a mournful voice; "the instant a piece of folly enters his head, it is carried out, no matter at what cost."

But Madame Fauvel saw no reason why her son should be thus harshly judged. "We must remember," she replied in an aggrieved tone, "that from infancy he has been left to his own unguided impulses. The unfortunate boy never had a mother to tend and counsel him. You must remember, too, that in his childhood he never knew a father's guidance."—"There is some excuse for him, to be sure; but nevertheless he must change his present course. Could you not speak seriously to him, madame? You have more influence over him than I."

She promised, but did not keep her promise. She had so little time to devote to Raoul, that it seemed cruel to spend it in reprimands. Sometimes she would hurry from home for the purpose of following the marquis's advice; but, the instant she saw Raoul, her courage failed, a pleading look from his soft, dark eyes silenced the rebuke upon her lips, the sound of his voice banished every anxious thought from her mind. But De Clameran was not a man to lose sight of the main object; he would have no compromise with duty. His brother had bequeathed to him, as a precious trust, his son Raoul; he regarded himself, he said, as his guardian, and would be held responsible in another world for his welfare. He entreated

Madame Fauvel to use her influence, when he found himself powerless in trying to check the heedless youth in his downward career. She ought, for the sake of her child, to see more of him, in fact, every day.

"Alas," the poor woman replied, "that would be my heart's desire. But how can I do it? Have I the right to ruin myself? I have other children, for whom I must be careful of my reputation." This answer appeared to astonish De Clameran. A fortnight before, Madame Fauvel would not have alluded to her other sons. "I will think the matter over," said Louis, "and perhaps when I see you next I shall be able to submit to you a plan which will reconcile everything."

The reflections of a man of so much experience could not be fruitless. He had a relieved, satisfied look, when he called to see Madame Fauvel in the following week. "I think I have solved the problem," he said.—"What problem?"—"The means of saving Raoul."

He explained himself by saying that as Madame Fauvel could not, without arousing her husband's suspicions, visit Raoul daily, she must receive him at her own house. This proposition shocked Madame Fauvel; for though she had been imprudent, even culpable, she was the soul of honor, and naturally shrank from the idea of introducing Raoul into the midst of her family, and seeing him welcomed by her husband, and perhaps become the friend of her sons. Her instinctive sense of justice made her declare that she would never consent to such an infamous step.

"Yes," said the marquis thoughtfully; "but then it is the only chance of saving your child." But this time, at least, she resisted, and with an indignation and an energy capable of shaking a will less strong than the Marquis de Clameran's. "No," she repeated, "no; I can never consent."

Before a week had passed she listened to this project, which at first had filled her with horror, with a willing ear, and even began to devise means for its speedy execution. Yes, after a cruel struggle, she finally yielded to the pressure of De Clameran's politely uttered threats and Raoul's wheedling entreaties. "But how?" she asked, "upon what pretext can I receive Raoul?"—"It would be the easiest thing in the world," replied De Clameran, "to introduce him as an ordinary acquaintance, as I, myself, have the honor of being. But Raoul must be more than that."

After torturing Madame Fauvel for a long time and almost driving her out of her mind, he finally revealed his scheme. "We have in our hands," he said, "the solution of the problem. It is an inspiration." Madame Fauvel eagerly scanned his face as she listened with the pitiable resignation of a martyr. "Have you not a cousin, a widow lady, who had two daughters, living at St. Remy?" continued Louis.—"Yes, Madame de Lagors."—"Precisely so. What fortune has she?"—"She is poor, sir, very poor."—"And but for the assistance you render her secretly, she would be thrown upon the charity of the world." Madame Fauvel was bewildered at finding the marquis so well informed of her private affairs. "How could you have discovered this?" she asked.—"Oh, I know all about this affair, and many others besides. I know, for instance, that your husband knows none of your relatives, and that he is scarcely aware of the existence of your cousin De Lagors. Do you begin to comprehend my plan?" She understood it slightly, and was asking herself how she could resist it.

"This," continued Louis, "is what I have planned. To-morrow or next day, you will receive a letter from your cousin at St. Remy, telling you that she has sent her son to Paris, and begging you to watch over him. Naturally you show this letter to your husband; and a few days afterward he warmly welcomes your nephew, Raoul de Lagors, a handsome, rich, attractive young man, who will do everything he can to please him, and who will succeed."

"Never, sir," replied Madame Fauvel, "my cousin is a pious, honorable woman, and nothing would induce her to countenance so shameful a transaction." The marquis smiled scornfully, and asked: "Who told you that I intended to confide in her?"—"But you would be obliged to do so!"

"You are very simple, madame. The letter which you will receive, and show to your husband, will be dictated by me, and posted at St. Remy by a friend of mine. If I spoke of the obligations under which you have placed your cousin, it was merely to show you that, in case of accident, her own interest would make her serve you. Do you see any other obstacle to this plan, madame?"

Madame Fauvel's eyes flashed with indignation. "Is my will of no account?" she exclaimed. "You seem to have made your arrangements without consulting me at all."—"Excuse me," said the marquis with ironical politeness; "I am

sure that you will take the same view of the matter as myself." —"But it is a crime, sir, that you propose—an abominable crime!"

This speech seemed to arouse all the bad passions slumbering in De Clameran's bosom; and his pale face had a fiendish expression as he fiercely replied: "I think we do not quite understand each other. Before you begin to talk about crime, think over your past life. You were not so timid and scrupulous when you gave yourself up to your lover. It is true that you did not hesitate to refuse to share his exile, when for your sake he had just jeopardized his life by killing two men. You felt no scruples at abandoning your child in London; although rolling in wealth, you never even inquired if this poor waif had bread to eat. You felt no scruples about marrying M. Fauvel. Did you tell your confiding husband of the lines of shame concealed beneath your wreath of orange-blossoms? No! All these crimes you indulge in; and, when in Gaston's name I demand reparation, you indignantly refuse! It is too late! You ruined the father; but you shall save the son, or I swear you shall no longer cheat the world of its esteem."—"I will obey you, sir," murmured the trembling, frightened woman.

The following week Raoul, now Raoul de Lagors, was seated at the banker's dinner-table, between Madame Fauvel and Madeleine.

XVII

IT was not without the most acute suffering and self-condemnation that Madame Fauvel submitted to the will of the relentless Marquis de Clameran. She had used every argument and entreaty to soften him; but he merely looked upon her with a triumphant, sneering smile when she knelt at his feet, and implored him to be merciful. Neither tears nor prayers moved his depraved soul. Disappointed, and almost desperate, she sought the intercession of her son. Raoul was in a state of furious indignation at the sight of his mother's distress, and

hastened to demand an apology from De Clameran. But he had reckoned without his host. He soon returned with downcast eyes, and moodily angry at his own powerlessness, declaring that safety demanded a complete surrender to the tyrant. Now only did the wretched woman fully fathom the abyss into which she was being dragged, and clearly see the labyrinth of crime of which she was becoming the victim. And all this suffering was the consequence of a fault, an interview granted to Gaston. Ever since that fatal day she had been vainly struggling against the implacable logic of events. Her life had been spent in trying to overcome the past, and now it had risen to crush her. The hardest thing of all to do, the act that most wrung her heart, was showing to her husband the forged letter from St. Remy, and saying that she expected soon to see her nephew, a quite young man, and very rich! But words can not paint the torture she endured on the evening she introduced Raoul to her family. It was with a smile on his lips that the banker welcomed this nephew, of whom he had never heard before. "It is natural," said he, as he held out his hand, "when one is young and rich, to prefer Paris to St. Remy." Raoul did his utmost to deserve this cordial reception. If his early education had been neglected, and he lacked those delicate refinements of manner and conversation which home influence imparts, his superior tact concealed these defects. He possessed the happy faculty of reading characters, and adapting his conversation to the minds of his listeners. Before a week had gone by he was a favorite with M. Fauvel, intimate with Abel and Lucien, and inseparable from Prosper Bertomy, the cashier, who then spent all his evenings with the banker's family. Charmed at the favorable impression made by Raoul, Madame Fauvel recovered comparative ease of mind, and at times almost congratulated herself upon having obeyed the marquis, and began once more to hope.

Raoul's intimacy with his cousins threw him among a set of rich young men, and as a consequence, instead of reforming, he daily grew more dissipated and reckless. Gambling, racing, expensive suppers, made money slip through his fingers like grains of sand. This proud young man, whose sensitive delicacy not long since made him refuse to accept aught save affection from his mother, now never approached her without demanding large sums of money. At first she gave with pleasure, without stopping to count the cash. But she soon per-

ceived that her generosity, if she did not keep it within bounds, would be her ruin. This rich woman, whose magnificent diamonds, elegant toilets, and superb equipages were the admiration and envy of Paris, knew misery in its bitterest form: that of not being able to gratify the desires of a beloved being. Her husband had never thought of giving her a fixed sum for expenses. The day after their wedding he gave her a key to his secretary, and ever since she had been in the habit of freely taking the money necessary for keeping up the establishment, and for her own personal requirements. But from the fact of her having always been so modest in her personal expenses, that her husband used to jest her on the subject, and of her having managed the household expenditure in a most judicious manner, she was not able to suddenly dispose of large sums without giving rise to embarrassing questions. M. Fauvel, the most generous of millionaires, would have been delighted to see his wife indulge in any extravagance, no matter how foolish; but he would naturally expect to see traces of the money spent, something to show for it. The banker might suddenly discover that much more than the usual amount of money was used in the house; and if he should ask the cause of this astonishing outlay, what answer could she give?

In three months Raoul had squandered a little fortune. In the first place, he was obliged to have bachelor's apartments, prettily furnished. He was in want of everything, just like a shipwrecked sailor. He asked for a horse and brougham—how could she refuse him? Then every day there was some fresh whim to be satisfied. When she would gently remonstrate, Raoul's beautiful eyes would fill with tears, and in a sad, humble tone he would say: "Alas! I am a child, a poor fool, I ask too much. I forget that I am only the son of poor Valentine, and not of the rich banker's wife!"

This touching repentance wrung her heart. The poor boy had suffered so much that it was her duty to console him, and she would finish by excusing him. She soon discovered that he was jealous and envious of his two brothers—for, after all, they were his brothers—Abel and Lucien.

"You never refuse them anything," he would say; "they were fortunate enough to enter life by the golden gate. Their every wish is gratified; they enjoy wealth, position, home affection, and have a splendid future awaiting them."

"But what is lacking to your happiness, unhappy child?"

Madame Fauvel would ask in despair.—"What do I want? apparently nothing, in reality everything. Do I possess anything legitimately? What right have I to your affection, to the comforts and luxuries you heap upon me, to the name I bear? Have I not, so to say, stolen even my life?"

When Raoul talked in this strain, she was ready to do anything, so that he should not be envious of her two other sons. As spring approached, she told him she wished him to spend the summer in the country, near her villa at St. Germain. She expected he would offer some objection. But not at all. The proposal seemed to please him, and a few days after he told her he had rented a little house at Vesinet, and intended having his furniture moved into it. "Then, just think, dear mother, what a happy summer we will spend together!" he said with beaming eyes.

She was delighted for many reasons, one of which was that the prodigal's expenses would probably diminish. Anxiety as to the exhausted state of her finances made her bold enough to chide him at the dinner table one day for having lost two thousand francs at the races the day before.

"You are severe, my dear," said M. Fauvel, with the carelessness of a rich man. "Mama de Lagors will pay; mamas were created for the special purpose of paying." And, not observing the effect these words had upon his wife, he turned to Raoul, and added: "Don't worry yourself, my boy; when you want money, come to me, and I will lend you some." What could Madame Fauvel say? Had she not followed De Clameran's orders, and announced that Raoul was very rich? Why had she been made to tell this unnecessary lie? She all at once perceived the snare which had been laid for her; but now she was caught, and it was too late to struggle. The banker's offer was soon accepted. That same week Raoul went to his uncle and boldly borrowed ten thousand francs. When Madame Fauvel heard of this piece of audacity, she wrung her hands in despair. "What can he want with so much money?" she moaned to herself.

For some time De Clameran had kept away from Madame Fauvel's house. She decided to write and ask him to call. She hoped that this energetic, determined man, who was so fully awake to his duties as a guardian, would make Raoul listen to reason. When De Clameran heard what had taken place, his surprise and anger were unbounded. A violent alterca-

tion ensued between him and Raoul. But Madame Fauvel's suspicions were aroused; she watched them, and it seemed to her—could it be possible—that their anger was feigned; that, although they abused and even threatened each other in the bitterest language, their eyes were smiling. She dared not breathe her doubts; but, like a subtle poison which disorganizes everything with which it comes in contact, this new suspicion filled her thoughts, and added to her already intolerable sufferings. Yet she never once thought of blaming Raoul, for she still loved him madly. She accused the marquis of taking advantage of the youthful weaknesses and inexperience of his nephew. She knew that she would have to suffer insolence and extortion from this man who had her completely in his power; but she could not penetrate his motive for acting as he did. He soon acquainted her with it.

One day, after complaining more bitterly than usual of Raoul, and proving to Madame Fauvel that it was impossible for this state of affairs to continue much longer, the marquis declared that he saw but one way of preventing a catastrophe. This was, that he (De Clameran) should marry Madeleine. Madame Fauvel had long ago been prepared for anything his cupidity could attempt. But if she had given up all hope of happiness for herself, if she consented to the sacrifice of her own peace of mind, it was because she thus hoped to insure the security of those dear to her. This unexpected declaration shocked her. "Do you suppose for an instant, sir," she indignantly exclaimed, "that I will consent to any such disgraceful project?" With a nod, the marquis answered: "Yes."—"What sort of a woman do you think I am, sir? Alas! I was very guilty once, but the punishment now exceeds the fault. And does it become you to be constantly reproaching me with my long-past imprudence? So long as I alone had to suffer, you found me weak and timid; but now that you attack those I love, I rebel."—"Would it then, madame, be such a very great misfortune for Mademoiselle Madeleine to become the Marquise de Clameran?"

"My niece, sir, chose, of her own free will, a husband whom she will shortly marry. She loves M. Prosper Bertomy." The marquis disdainfully shrugged his shoulders. "A school-girl love affair," said he; "she will forget all about it when you wish her to do so."—"I will never wish it."

"Excuse me," he replied in the low, suppressed tone of a man trying to control himself; "let us not waste time in these

idle discussions. Hitherto you have always commenced by protesting against my proposed plans, and in the end acknowledged the good sense and justness of my arguments. This time, also, you will oblige me by yielding."—"Never," said Madame Fauvel; "never!"

De Clameran paid no attention to this interruption, but went on: "If I insist upon this marriage, it is because it will reestablish your affairs, as well as ours. Of course you see that the allowance you give your son is insufficient for his extravagant style of living. The time approaches when you will have nothing more to give him, and you will no longer be able to conceal from your husband your constant encroachments on the housekeeping money. When that day comes, what is to be done?"

Madame Fauvel shuddered. The dreaded day of which the marquis spoke could not be far off. "Then," he continued, "you will render justice to my wise forethought, and to my good intentions. Mademoiselle Madeleine is rich; her dowry will enable me to supply the deficit, and save you."—"I would rather be ruined than be saved by such means."—"But I will not permit you to ruin us all. Remember, madame, that we are associated in a common cause—Raoul's future welfare."—"Cease your importunities," she said, looking him steadily in the face. "I have made up my mind irrevocably."—"To what?"—"To do everything and anything to escape your shameful persecution. Oh! you need not smile. I shall, if necessary, throw myself at M. Fauvel's feet and confess everything. He loves me, and, knowing how I have suffered, will forgive me."—"Do you think so?" asked De Clameran, derisively.—"You mean to say that he will be pitiless, and banish me from his roof! So be it; it will only be what I deserve. There is no torture that I can not bear after what I have suffered through you."

This inconceivable resistance so upset all the marquis's plans that he lost all constraint, and, dropping the mask of politeness, appeared in his true character. "Indeed!" he said, in a fierce, brutal tone; "so you have decided to confess to your husband! A famous idea! What a pity you did not think of it before! Confessing everything the first day I called on you, you might have been forgiven. Your husband might have pardoned a youthful fault, atoned for by twenty years of irreproachable conduct; for none can deny that you have been a faithful wife and a good mother. But picture the indignation of your trusting husband when you tell him that this pretended nephew—

whom you impose upon his family circle, who sits at his table, who borrows his money—is your illegitimate son! M. Fauvel is, no doubt, an excellent, kind-hearted man; but I scarcely think he will pardon a deception of this nature, which betrays such depravity, duplicity, and audacity."

All that the angry marquis said was horribly true; yet Madame Fauvel listened unflinchingly. "Upon my word," he went on, "you must be very much infatuated with this M. Bertomy! Between the honor of your husband's name, and pleasing this love-sick cashier, you refuse to hesitate. Well, I suppose it will console you when M. Fauvel separates from you, and Abel and Lucien avert their faces at your approach, and blush at being your sons—it will be very sweet to be able to say: 'I have made Prosper happy!'"

"Happen what may, I shall do what is right," said Madame Fauvel.—"You shall do what I tell you!" cried De Clameran, threateningly. "Do you suppose that I will allow your sentimentality to blast all my hopes? Your niece's fortune is indispensable to us, and, more than that, I love the fair Madeleine."

The blow once struck, the marquis judged it prudent to await the result. With cool politeness, he added: "I will leave you now, madame, to think the matter over. Believe me, consent to this sacrifice—it will be the last required of you. Think of the honor of your family, and not of your niece's love affairs. I will call in three days for your answer."—"You will come uselessly, sir. I shall tell my husband everything as soon as he returns." If Madame Fauvel had not been so agitated herself she would have detected an expression of alarm upon De Clameran's face. With a shrug, which meant, "Just as you please," he said: "I think you have sense enough to keep your secret." He bowed ceremoniously, and left the room, but slammed the door after him with a violence that betrayed the constraint he had imposed upon himself. De Clameran had cause for fear. Madame Fauvel's determination was not feigned. "Yes," she cried, with the enthusiasm of a noble resolution; "yes, I will tell Andre everything."

She believed herself to be alone, but turned round suddenly at the sound of footsteps, and found herself face to face with Madeleine, who was pale as a statue, and whose eyes were full of tears. "You must obey this man, aunt," she quietly said. Adjoining the drawing-room were two little card-rooms, shut off only by heavy silk surtains. Madeleine, unknown to

her aunt, was sitting in one of the little rooms when the marquis arrived, and had overheard the conversation.

"Good heavens!" cried Madame Fauvel with terror; "do you know?"—"I know everything, aunt."—"And you wish me to sacrifice you to this fiend?"—"I implore you to let me save you."—"You must certainly hate M. de Clameran."—"I hate him, aunt, and despise him. He will always be for me the basest of men; nevertheless I will marry him."

Madame Fauvel was overcome by the magnitude of this devotion. "And what is to become of Prosper, my poor child—Prosper, whom you love?" Madeleine stifled a sob, and replied in a firm voice: "To-morrow I will break off my engagement with M. Bertomy."—"I will never permit such a wrong," cried Madame Fauvel. "I will not add to my sins by suffering an innocent girl to bear their penalty."

The noble girl sadly shook her head, and replied: "Neither will I suffer dishonor to fall upon this house, which is my home, while I have power to prevent it. Am I not indebted to you for more than life? What would I now be had you not taken pity on me? A factory girl in my native town. You warmly welcomed the poor orphan, and became a mother to her. Is it not to your husband that I owe the fortune which excites this villain's cupidity? Are not Abel and Lucien brothers to me? And now, when the happiness of us all is at stake, do you suppose I would hesitate? No. I will become the wife of De Clameran."

Then began a struggle of self-sacrifice between Madame Fauvel and her niece, as to which should be the victim; and all the more sublime, because each offered her life to the other, not from any sudden impulse, but deliberately and willingly. But Madeleine was bound to triumph, fired as she was by that holy enthusiasm of sacrifice which makes martyrs.—"I am responsible to none but myself," she said, well knowing this to be the most vulnerable point she could attack; "while you, dear aunt, are accountable to your husband and children. Think of my uncle's pain and sorrow if he should ever learn the truth! It would kill him."

The generous girl was right. After having sacrificed her husband to her mother, Madame Fauvel was about to immolate her husband and children for Raoul. As an impalpable snowflake may be the beginning of an avalanche, so an imprudence is often the prelude to a great crime. To false situations there is but one safe issue—truth.

Madame Fauvel's resistance grew weaker and weaker. "But," she faintly argued, "I can not accept your sacrifice. What sort of a life will you lead with this man?"—"We can hope for the best," replied Madeleine, with a cheerfulness she was far from feeling; "he loves me, he says; perhaps he will be kind to me."—"Ah, if I only knew where to obtain money! It is money that the grasping man wants; money alone will satisfy him."—"Does he not want it for Raoul? Has not Raoul, by his extravagant follies, dug an abyss which must be bridged over by money? If I could only believe M. de Clameran!"

Madame Fauvel looked at her niece with bewildered curiosity. What! this inexperienced girl had weighed the matter in its different lights before deciding upon a surrender; whereas, she, a wife and a mother, had blindly yielded to the inspirations of her heart! "What do you mean?" she asked.—"I mean this, aunt, that I do not believe that De Clameran has any thought of his nephew's welfare. Once in possession of my fortune, he may leave you and Raoul to your fates. And there is another dreadful suspicion that tortures my mind."—"A suspicion?"—"Yes, and I would reveal it to you, if I dared; if I did not fear that you—"—"Speak!" insisted Madame Fauvel. "Alas! misfortune has given me strength. I can fear nothing worse than what has already happened. I am ready to hear anything."

Madeleine hesitated; she wished to enlighten her credulous aunt, and yet feared to distress her. "I would like to be certain," she said, "that some secret understanding between M. de Clameran and Raoul does not exist, that they are not acting a part agreed upon between them beforehand."

Love is blind and deaf. Madame Fauvel no longer remembered the laughing eyes of the two men, upon the occasion of the pretended quarrel in her presence. She could not, she would not, believe in such hypocrisy. "It is impossible," she said: "the marquis is really indignant and distressed at his nephew's mode of life, and he certainly would never give him any bad advice. As to Raoul, he is vain, trifling, and extravagant; but he has a good heart. Prosperity has turned his head, but he loves me. Ah, if you could see and hear him, when I reproach him for his faults, your suspicions would fly to the winds. When he tearfully promises to be more prudent, he means to keep his word. If he breaks his promises, it is because perfidious friends lead him astray."

Mothers always blame their children's friends. The friend

is the guilty one. Madeleine had not the heart to undeceive her aunt. "God grant that what you say may be true," she said; "if so, my marriage will not be useless. We will write to M. de Clameran to-night."—"Why to-night, Madeleine? We need not hurry so. Let us wait a little; something might happen to save us."

These words—this confidence in chance, in a mere nothing—revealed Madame Fauvel's true character, and accounted for her troubles. Timid, hesitating, easily swayed, she never could come to a firm decision, form a resolution, and abide by it, in spite of all arguments brought to bear against it. In the hour of peril she would always shut her eyes, and trust to chance for a relief which never came. Quite different was Madeleine's character. Beneath her gentle timidity, lay a strong, self-reliant will. Once decided upon a sacrifice, it was to be carried out to the letter; she shut out all deceitful illusions, and walked straight forward without one look back.

"We had better end the matter at once, dear aunt," she said, in a gentle but firm tone. "Believe me, the reality of misfortune is not as painful as its apprehension. You can not bear the shocks of sorrow, and delusive hopes of happiness, much longer. Do you know what anxiety of mind has done to you? Have you looked in your mirror during the last four months?" She led her aunt up to a looking-glass, and said: "Look at yourself." Madame Fauvel was, indeed, a mere shadow of her former self. She had reached the age when a woman's beauty, like a full-blown rose, fades in a day. Four months of trouble had made her an old woman. Sorrow had stamped its fatal seal upon her brow. Her fair, soft skin was wrinkled, her hair was streaked with silver. "Do you not agree with me," continued Madeleine, pityingly, "that peace of mind is necessary to you? Do you not see that you are a wreck of your former self? Is it not a miracle that M. Fauvel has not noticed this sad change in you?" Madame Fauvel, who flattered herself that she had displayed wonderful dissimulation, shook her head. "Alas! my poor aunt! did I not discover that you had a secret?"

"You, Madeleine?"—"Yes! only I thought— Oh! pardon an unjust suspicion, but I was wicked enough to suppose—" She stopped, too distressed to finish her sentence; then, making a painful effort, she added: "I was afraid that perhaps you loved another man better than my uncle."

Madame Fauvel sobbed aloud. Madeleine's suspicion might be entertained by others. "My reputation is gone," she moaned. —"No, dear aunt, no," exclaimed the young girl, "do not be alarmed. Have courage: we two can fight now; we will defend ourselves, we will save ourselves."

The Marquis de Clameran was agreeably surprised that evening by receiving a letter from Madame Fauvel, saying that she consented to everything, but must have a little time to carry out the plan. Madeleine, she said, could not break off her engagement with M. Bertomy in a day. M. Fauvel would make objections, for he had an affection for Prosper, and had tacitly approved of the match. It would be wiser to leave to time the smoothing away of certain obstacles which a sudden attack might render insurmountable. A line from Madeleine, at the bottom of her letter, assured him of her consent.

Poor girl! she did not spare herself. The next day she took Prosper aside, and forced from him the fatal promise to shun her in the future, and to take upon himself the responsibility of breaking their engagement. He implored Madeleine to at least explain the reason of this banishment, which destroyed all his hopes of happiness. She simply replied that her peace of mind and honor depended upon his obedience. He left her sick at heart. As he went out of the house, the marquis entered. Yes, he had the audacity to come in person, to tell Madame Fauvel that, now he had the promise of herself and Madeleine, he would consent to wait awhile. He himself saw the necessity of patience, knowing that he was not liked by the banker. Having the aunt and niece in his power, he was certain of success. He said to himself that the moment would come when a deficit impossible to be replaced would force them to hasten the wedding. And Raoul did all he could to bring matters to a crisis. Madame Fauvel went sooner than usual to her country seat, and Raoul at once moved into his house at Vesinet. But living in the country did not lessen his expenses. Gradually he laid aside all hypocrisy, and only came to see his mother when he wanted money; and his demands were frequent and more exorbitant each time. As for the marquis, he prudently absented himself, awaiting the propitious moment. And it was quite by chance that three weeks later, meeting the banker at a friend's, he was invited to dinner the next day.

Twenty people were seated at the table; and as the dessert

was being served, the banker suddenly turned to De Clameran and said: "I have a question to ask you, marquis. Have you any relatives bearing your name?"—"None that I know of, sir."—"I am surprised. About a week ago, I became acquainted with another Marquis de Clameran."

Although so hardened by crime, impudent enough to deny anything, De Clameran was taken aback and turned pale. "Oh, indeed! That is strange. A De Clameran may exist; but I can not understand the title of marquis."

M. Fauvel was not sorry to have the opportunity of annoying a guest whose aristocratic pretensions had often piqued him. "Marquis or not," he replied, "the De Clameran in question seems to be able to do honor to the title."—"Is he rich?"—"I have reason to suppose that he is very wealthy. I have been authorized to collect for him four hundred thousand francs."

De Clameran had a wonderful faculty of self-control; he had so schooled himself that his face never betrayed what was passing through his mind. But this news was so startling, so strange, so pregnant of danger, that his usual assurance deserted him. He detected a peculiar look of irony in the banker's eye. The only persons who noticed this sudden change in the marquis's manner were Madeleine and her aunt. They saw him turn pale, and exchange a meaning look with Raoul.

"Then I suppose this new marquis is a merchant," said De Clameran, after a moment's pause.—"You ask too much. All that I know is, that four hundred thousand francs are to be deposited to his account by some shipowners of Havre, after the sale of the cargo of a Brazilian ship."—"Then he comes from Brazil?"—"I do not know, but I can, if you like, give you his Christian name."—"I would be obliged."

M. Fauvel rose from the table, and brought from the next room a memorandum-book, and began to read over the names written in it. "Wait a moment," he said: "let me see—the 22d, no, it was later than that. Ah, here it is: De Clameran, Gaston. His name is Gaston."

But this time Louis betrayed no emotion or alarm; he had had sufficient time to recover his self-possession, and nothing could now throw him off his guard. "Gaston?" he queried carelessly. "I know who he is now. He must be the son of my father's sister, whose husband lived at Havana. I suppose, upon his return to France, he must have taken his mother's

name, which is more sonorous than his father's, that being, if I recollect aright, Moirot or Boirot."

The banker laid down his memorandum-book, and, resuming his seat, said: "Boirot or De Clameran, I hope to have the pleasure of inviting you to dine with him before long. Of the four hundred thousand francs which I was ordered to collect for him, he only wishes to draw one hundred, and tells me to keep the rest on current account. I judge from this, that he intends coming to Paris."—"I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

De Clameran broached another topic, and seemed to have entirely forgotten the news told him by the banker. Although apparently engrossed in the conversation at the table, he closely watched Madame Fauvel and her niece. He saw that they were unable to conceal their agitation, and stealthily exchanged significant looks. Evidently the same terrible idea had crossed their minds. Madeleine seemed more nervous and startled than her aunt. When M. Fauvel uttered Gaston's name, she saw Raoul begin to draw back his chair and glance in a frightened manner toward the window, like a detected thief looking for means of escape. Raoul, less experienced than his uncle, was thoroughly discountenanced. He, the original talker, the lion of a dinner party, never at a loss for some witty speech, was now perfectly dumb; he sat anxiously watching Louis. At last the dinner ended, and as the guests passed into the drawing-rooms, De Clameran and Raoul managed to remain last in the dining-room. When they were alone, they no longer attempted to conceal their anxiety.

"It is he!" said Raoul.—"I have no doubt of it."—"Then all is lost; we had better make our escape."

But a bold adventurer like De Clameran had no idea of giving up the ship till forced to do so. "Who knows what may happen?" he asked thoughtfully. "There is hope yet. Why did not that muddle-headed banker tell us where this De Clameran is to be found?" Here he uttered a joyful exclamation. He saw M. Fauvel's memorandum book lying on the side-board. "Watch!" he said to Raoul.

Seizing the note-book, he hurriedly turned over the leaves, and, in an undertone, read: "Gaston, Marquis de Clameran, Oloron, Lower Pyrenees."—"Well, does finding out his address assist us?" inquired Raoul eagerly.—"It may save us: that is all. Let us return to the drawing-room; our absence might be

observed. Exert yourself to appear unconcerned and gay. You almost betrayed us once by your agitation."—"The two women suspect something."—"Well, suppose they do?"—"It is not safe for us here."—"Were you any better in London? Don't be so easily frightened. I am going to plant my batteries."

They joined the other guests. But, if their conversation had not been overheard, their movements had been watched. Madeleine had come on tiptoe, and, looking through the half-open door, had seen De Clameran consulting her uncle's note-book. But what benefit would she derive from this proof of the marquis's anxiety? She no longer doubted the villainy of the man to whom she had promised her hand. As he had said to Raoul, neither Madeleine nor her aunt could escape him. Two hours later, De Clameran was on the road to Vesinet with Raoul, explaining to him his plans.

"It is he, and no mistake," he said. "But we are too easily alarmed, my fine nephew."—"Nonsense! the banker is expecting him; he may be among us to-morrow."—"Don't be an idiot!" interrupted De Clameran. "Does he know that Fauvel is Valentine's husband? If he knows that little fact, we must take to our heels; if he is ignorant of it, our case is not desperate."—"How can we find out?"—"By simply going and asking him."—"That is a brilliant idea," said Raoul, admiringly; "but dangerous."—"It is not as dangerous as not doing it. And, as to running away at the first suspicion of alarm, it would be downright imbecility."

"And who will go and see him?"

"I will!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Raoul in three different tones. De Clameran's audacity confounded him. "But what am I to do?" he inquired.

"You will oblige me by remaining here. At the least sign of danger, I will send you a telegram, and then you must make off."

As they parted at Raoul's door, De Clameran said: "It is then understood you will remain here. But mind, so long as my absence lasts, become once more the best of sons. Set yourself against me, calumniate me if you can. But no nonsense. No demands for money. So now, good-by! To-morrow night I shall be at Oloron and shall have seen this De Clameran.

AFTER leaving Valentine de la Verberie, Gaston underwent great peril and difficulty in effecting his escape. But for the experienced and faithful Menoul, he never would have succeeded in embarking. Having left his mother's jewels with Valentine, his sole fortune consisted of not quite a thousand francs; and it is not with a paltry sum like that that a fugitive who has just killed two men can pay for his passage on board a ship. But Menoul was a man of experience. While Gaston remained concealed in a farmhouse at Camargue, Menoul went to Marseilles, and the same evening learned that a three-masted American vessel was in the roadstead, whose commander, Captain Warth, a not overscrupulous person, would be glad to welcome on board an able-bodied man who would be of assistance to him at sea, and would not trouble himself about his antecedents. After visiting the vessel and taking a glass of rum with the captain, old Menoul returned to Gaston.

"If it was a question of myself, sir," he said, "I should avail myself of the opportunity, but you?"—"What suits you, suits me," interrupted Gaston.—"You see, the fact is, you will be obliged to work very hard. You will only be a common sailor, you know! And I must confess that the ship's company is not the most moral one I ever saw. The captain, too, seems a swaggering bully."—"I have no choice," said Gaston. "I will go on board at once."

Old Menoul's suspicions were correct. Before Gaston had been on board the "Tom Jones" forty-eight hours, he saw that chance had cast him among a collection of the most depraved bandits and cut-throats. The crew, recruited seemingly anywhere, contained specimens of the rascals of almost every country. But Gaston's mind was undisturbed as to the character of the people with whom his lot was cast for several months. It was only his body that the vessel was carrying to another land. His heart and soul rested in the shady park of La Verberie, beside his beloved Valentine. And what would

become of her now, poor child, when he was no longer there to love, console, and defend her? Happily, he had no time for sad reflections. His every moment was occupied in learning the rough apprenticeship of a sailor's life. All his energies were spent in bearing up under the heavy burden of labor allotted to him. This was his salvation. Physical suffering calmed and deadened his mental agony. The few hours' relaxation granted him were spent in sleep. He had sworn that he would return before the end of three years, rich enough to satisfy the exactions of Madame de la Verberie. Judging from the conversation of his companions, he was not now on the road to the fortune he so much desired. The "Tom Jones" was sailing for Valparaiso, but certainly went in a roundabout way to reach her destination. The real fact was that Captain Warth proposed visiting the Gulf of Guinea. A friend of his, a black prince, he said, with a loud laugh, was waiting for him at Badagri, to exchange a cargo of "*ebony*" for some pipes of rum, and a hundred flint-lock muskets which were on board. Gaston soon saw that he was serving his apprenticeship on one of the numerous slavers equipped yearly by some free and philanthropic Americans. Although this discovery filled Gaston with indignation and shame, he was prudent enough to conceal his impressions. His remonstrances, no matter how eloquent, would have made no change in Captain Warth's opinions regarding a traffic which brought him in more than one hundred per cent, in spite of the French and English cruisers, the damages, sometimes entire loss of cargoes, and many other risks. The crew had a certain respect for Gaston when the story of his having killed two men, as related by Menoul to the captain, transpired. To have given vent to his feelings would have incurred the enmity of the whole of his shipmates, without bettering his own situation. He therefore kept quiet, but swore mentally that he would desert on the first opportunity. This opportunity, like everything impatiently longed for, came not. By the end of three months Captain Warth found Gaston indispensable. Seeing him so intelligent, he took a fancy to him, liked to have him at his own table, listened to his conversation with pleasure, and was glad of his company in a game of cards. The mate of the ship dying, Gaston was chosen to replace him. In this capacity he made two successive voyages to Guinea, bringing back a thousand blacks, whom he superintended during a trip of fifteen hundred leagues, and

finally landed clandestinely on the coast of Brazil. When Gaston had been about three years on board, the "Tom Jones" put into Rio de Janeiro. He now had an opportunity of leaving the captain, who was after all a worthy man, who never would have engaged in the diabolical traffic of human beings but for his little daughter's sake, his little Mary, whose dowry he wished to make a magnificent one. Gaston had saved twelve thousand francs out of his share of the profits, when he landed in Brazil. As a proof that the slave trade was repugnant to his nature he left the slaver the moment he possessed a little capital with which to enter some honest business. But he was no longer the high-minded, pure-hearted Gaston, who had been so beloved by the little fairy of La Verberie. As the exposure to rain, sun, and sea air first darkened and then hardened his skin, so did wicked associates first shock and then destroy the refinement and purity of Gaston's mind. His heart had become as hard and coarse as his sailor hands. He still remembered Valentine, and sighed for her presence; but though she was still the most beloved, she was no longer the one woman in the world to him. However, the three years, after which he had pledged himself to return, had passed; perhaps Valentine was expecting him. Before deciding on any definite project, he wrote to an intimate friend at Beaucaire to learn what had happened during his long absence. He also wrote to his father, to whom he had already sent several letters, whenever he had an opportunity of doing so. At the end of a year, he received his friend's reply. It told him that his father was dead, that his brother had left France, that Valentine was married, and, finally, that he, Gaston, had been sentenced to several years' imprisonment for manslaughter. Henceforth he was alone in the world, with no country, disgraced by a public sentence. Valentine was married, and he had no further object in life! He would hereafter have faith in no one, since she, Valentine, had cast him off and forgotten him, had lacked the courage to keep her promise and wait for him. In his despair, he almost regretted the "Tom Jones."

But Gaston was not a man to be long cast down. "I will earn money, then," he cried with rage, "since money is the only thing in this world which never deceives!" And he set to work with a greedy activity which increased every day. He tried all the many speculations open to adventurers. Alternately he traded in furs, worked a mine, and cultivated lands.

Five times he went to bed rich, and waked up ruined; five times, with the patience of the beaver, whose hut is swept away by the current, he recommenced the building of his fortune. Finally, after long, weary years of toil and struggle, he was worth about a million in gold, besides immense tracts of land. He had often said that he would never leave Brazil, that he wanted to end his days in Rio. He had forgotten that love for his native land never dies in a Frenchman's breast. Now that he was rich, he wished to die in France. He made inquiries, and found that the law of limitations would permit him to return without being disturbed by the authorities. He realized what he could of his property, and, leaving the rest in charge of an agent, embarked for France. Twenty-three years and four months had elapsed since he fled from home, when, on a bright day in January, 1866, he stood upon the quays at Bordeaux. He had departed a young man, with his heart brimful of hope; he returned gray-haired, and believing in nothing. His health, too, on his arrival, began to suffer from the sudden change of climate. Rheumatism confined him to his bed for several months. As soon as he could sit up, the physicians sent him to some baths, where they said he would regain his health. When cured, he felt that inactivity would kill him. Charmed with the beauty of the Pyrenees, and the lovely valley of Aspe, he resolved to take up his abode there. An iron foundry was for sale near Oloron, on the banks of the Gave; he bought it with the intention of utilizing the immense quantity of wood, which for want of means of transport was wasting in the mountains.

He had been settled some weeks in his new house, when one evening his servant brought him the card of a stranger who desired to see him. He read the name on the card: *Louis de Clameran.* Many years had passed since Gaston had experienced such violent agitation. His blood rushed to his head, and he trembled like a leaf. The old home affections which he thought dead now sprung up anew in his heart. A thousand confused memories rushed through his mind. Words rose to his lips, but he was unable to utter them. "My brother!" he at length gasped, "my brother!" Hurriedly passing by the frightened servant, he ran downstairs. In the hall a man, Louis de Clameran, stood waiting. Gaston threw his arms round his neck and held him in a close embrace for some minutes, and then drew him into a room. Seated close beside

Louis, and tightly clasping his two hands, Gaston gazed on his face as a fond mother would gaze at her son just returned from the battlefield.

"And is this really Louis?" he cried. "My dearly loved brother? Why, I should have recognized you among a thousand; the expression of your face has not in the least changed, your smile is the same as it used to be."

Louis did indeed smile, just as he perhaps smiled on that fatal night when his horse stumbled, and prevented Gaston's escape. He smiled now as if he were perfectly happy; he seemed overjoyed. He had exerted all the courage he possessed to venture upon this meeting. Nothing but the most terrible necessity would have induced him to present himself thus. His teeth chattered and he trembled in every limb when he rang Gaston's bell, and handed the servant his card, saying: "Take this to your master." The few moments that elapsed before Gaston's appearance seemed to him centuries. He said to himself: "Perhaps it is not he. And if it is, does he know? Does he suspect anything?" He was so anxious that, when he saw Gaston rushing downstairs, he felt like fleeing from the house. Not knowing the nature of Gaston's feelings toward him, he stood perfectly motionless. But one glance at his brother's face convinced him that he was the same affectionate, credulous, trusting Gaston of old; and, now that he was almost certain that his brother harbored no suspicions, he recovered himself and smiled.

"After all," continued Gaston, "I am not alone in the world; I shall have some one to love, some one to care for me." Then, as if suddenly struck by a thought, he asked: "Are you married, Louis?"—"No."—"That is a pity, a great pity. It would so have added to my happiness to see you the husband of a good, affectionate woman, the father of bright, lovely children! It would have been a comfort to have a happy family about me. I should have looked upon them all as my own. To live alone, without a loving wife to share one's joys and sorrows, is not living at all. Oh, the sadness of having only one's self to care for! But what am I saying? I have you, Louis, and is not that enough? I have a brother, a friend with whom I can talk aloud, as I have for so long talked to myself."

"Yes, Gaston, yes, a good friend!"—"Of course! for are you not my brother? So you are not married! Then we will keep house together. We will live like two old bachelors, as we are, and be as happy as kings; we will amuse each other,

we will thoroughly enjoy ourselves. What a capital idea! You make me feel young again, barely twenty. I feel as active and strong as I did the night I swam across the swollen Rhone. And that was long, long ago; and since, I have struggled, I have suffered, I have cruelly aged and changed."

"You!" interrupted Louis; "why, you have not aged as much as I have."—"You are jesting."—"I assure you."—"Would you have recognized me?"—"Instantly. You are very little changed."

And Louis was right. He himself had a worn-out, used-up appearance rather than an aged one; while Gaston, in spite of his gray hair and weather-beaten face, was a robust man, in his prime. It was a relief to turn from Louis's restless eyes and crafty smiles to Gaston's frank, honest face. "But," said Gaston, "how did you know that I was living? What kind fairy guided you to my house?"

Louis was prepared for this question. During his eighteen hours' ride in the train he had had time to arrange all his answers. "We must thank Providence for this happy meeting," he replied. "Three days ago, a friend of mine returned from some baths, and mentioned that he had heard that a Marquis de Clameran was near there, in the Pyrenees. You can imagine my surprise. I instantly supposed that some impostor had assumed our name. I took the next train, and finally found my way here."

"Then you did not expect to see me?"—"My dear brother, how could I hope for that? I thought that you were drowned twenty-three years ago."—"Drowned! Mademoiselle de la Verberie certainly told you of my escape. She promised that she would go herself, the next day, and tell my father of my safety." Louis assumed a distressed look, as if he hesitated to tell the sad truth, and murmured in a regretful tone: "Alas! she never told us."

Gaston's eyes flashed with indignation. He thought that perhaps Valentine had been glad to get rid of him. "She did not tell you?" he exclaimed. "Did she have the cruelty to let you mourn my death? To let my old father die of a broken heart? Ah! she must have been very fearful of the world's opinion. She sacrificed me, then, for the sake of her reputation."

"But why did you not write to us?" asked Louis.—"I did write as soon as I had an opportunity; and Lafourcade wrote back, saying that my father was dead, and that you had left

the neighborhood."—"I left Clameran because I believed you to be dead."

Gaston rose, and walked up and down the room as if to shake off a feeling of sadness; then he said cheerfully: "Well, it's of no use mourning over the past. All the memories in the world, good or bad, are not worth one slender hope for the future; and, thank heaven, we have a bright future before us." Louis was silent. His footing was not sure enough to risk any questions. "But here I have been talking incessantly for an hour," said Gaston, "and I dare say that you have not dined." —"No, I have not, I own."—"Why did you not say so before? I forgot that I had not dined myself. I will not let you starve the first day of your arrival. Ah! I have some splendid old Cape wine."

He pulled the bell, and ordered the servant to hasten dinner; and within half an hour the two brothers were seated at a sumptuous repast. Gaston kept up an uninterrupted stream of questions. He wished to know all that had happened during his absence. "What about Clameran?" he abruptly asked.

Louis hesitated a moment. Should he tell the truth or not? "I have sold Clameran," he finally said.—"The chateau too?"— "Yes."

"You acted as you thought best," said Gaston, sadly; "but it seems to me that, if I had been in your place, I should have kept the old homestead. Our ancestors lived there for many generations, and our father died there." Then seeing Louis appeared sad and distressed, he quickly added: "However, it is just as well; it is in the heart that memory dwells, and not in a pile of old stones. I myself had not the courage to return to Provence. I could not trust myself to go to Clameran, where I would have to gaze on the park of La Verberie. Alas, the only happy moments of my life were spent there!"

Louis's countenance immediately cleared. The certainty that Gaston had not been to Provence relieved his mind of an immense weight. The next day he telegraphed to Raoul: "Wisdom and prudence. Follow my directions. All goes well. Be sanguine."

All was going well; and yet Louis, in spite of his skilfully plied questions, had obtained none of the information which he had come to seek. Gaston was communicative on every subject except the one in which Louis was most interested. Louis, like all villains, was ever ready to attribute to others the bad

motives by which he himself would be influenced. Anything was better than this uncertainty; he determined to ask his brother what he intended doing. They had just sat down to lunch, and he thought the moment an opportune one. "Do you know, my dear Gaston," he began by saying, "that thus far we have spoken of everything except serious matters?"—"Why do you look so solemn, Louis! What are the grave subjects you allude to?"—"Well, there is this: believing you to be dead, I inherited all our father left."—"Is that what you call a serious matter?" asked Gaston with an amused smile.—"Certainly. I owe you an account of your share; you have a right to half." —"I have," interrupted Gaston, "a right to ask you never to allude to the subject again. What you have is yours by limitation."—"No, I can not accept it."—"But you must. Our father wished to have only one of us to inherit his property; we will be carrying out his wishes by not dividing it." Seeing that Louis's face still remained clouded, Gaston added: "Come now, you must be very rich, or think me very poor, to insist thus."

Louis started at this remark. What could he say so as not to commit himself? "I am neither rich nor poor," he finally observed.—"I am delighted to hear it," exclaimed his brother. "I wish you were as poor as Job, so that I might share what I have with you."

Luncheon over, Gaston rose and said: "Come, I want to show you my—that is, our property." Louis uneasily followed. It seemed to him that Gaston obstinately shunned anything like an explanation. Could all this brotherly affection be assumed to blind him as to his real plans? Louis's fears were again aroused, and he almost regretted his hasty telegram. But his calm, smiling face betrayed none of the anxious thoughts which filled his mind. He was called upon to examine everything. First he was taken over the house and then the servants' quarters, the stables, kennels, and the vast, beautifully laid-out garden. Across a pretty meadow was the iron foundry in full operation. Gaston, with all the enthusiasm of a new proprietor, explained everything, down to the smallest file and hammer. He detailed all his projects; how he intended substituting wood for coal, and how, besides having plenty to work the forge, he could make immense profits by felling the forest trees, which had hitherto been considered impracticable. Louis approved of everything; but only answered in monosyllables: "Ah, indeed! excellent idea! quite a success!" His mind was tortured

by a new pain; he was paying no attention to Gaston's remarks, but enviously comparing all this wealth and prosperity with his own poverty. He found Gaston rich, respected, and happy, enjoying the price of his own industry; while he— Never had he so cruelly felt the misery of his condition, which was of his own making. After a lapse of twenty-three years, all the envy and hate he had felt toward Gaston, when they were boys together, revived.

"What do you think of my purchase?" asked Gaston when the inspection was over.—"I think you possess, my dear brother, a most charming property, situated in the loveliest spot in the world. It is enough to excite the envy of any poor Parisian."—"Do you really think so?"—"Certainly."

"Then, my dear Louis," said Gaston joyfully, "this property is yours, as well as mine. You like it, then live here always. Do you really care for your foggy Paris? Do you not prefer this beautiful Beara sky? The scanty and paltry luxury of Paris is not equal to the good and plentiful living you will find here. You are a bachelor, therefore you have no ties. Remain, we shall want for nothing. And, to employ our time, there is the foundry. Does my plan suit you?"

Louis was silent. A year ago this proposal would have been eagerly welcomed. How gladly he would have seized this offer of a comfortable, luxurious home, after having been buffeted about the world so long! How delightful it would have been to turn over a new leaf and become an honest man! But he saw, with disappointment and rage, that he would now be compelled to decline it. No, he was no longer free. He could not leave Paris. He had become entangled in one of those hazardous plots which are lost if neglected, and the loss of which generally leads the projector into penal servitude. Alone, he could easily remain where he was; but he was trammeled with an accomplice.

"You do not answer me," said Gaston, with surprise; "are there any obstacles to my plans?"—"None."—"What is the matter, then?"—"The matter is, my dear brother, that the salary of an appointment which I hold in Paris is all that I have to support me."—"Is that your only objection? Yet you just now wanted to pay me back half of the family inheritance! Louis, that is unkind; you are not acting as a brother should." Louis hung his head. Gaston was unconsciously telling the truth. "I should be a burden to you, Gaston."

"A burden! Why, Louis, you must be mad! Did I not tell you I was very rich? Do you suppose that you have seen all I possess? This house and the iron-works do not constitute a fourth of my fortune. Do you think that I would have risked my twenty years' savings in an experiment of this sort? I have invested, in State securities, an income of twenty-four thousand francs. And that is not all; it seems that I shall be able to sell my grants in Brazil; I am lucky! My agent has already forwarded me four hundred thousand francs."

Louis trembled with pleasure. He was, at last, to know the extent of the danger menacing him. "What agent?" he asked, with assumed indifference.—"Why, my old partner at Rio, of course. The money is now at my Paris banker's, quite at my disposal."—"Some friend of yours?"—"Well, no. He was recommended to me by my banker at Pau, as a very rich, prudent, and reliable man. His name is—let me see—Andre Fauvel, and he lives in the Rue de Provence."

Master of himself as he was, and prepared for what he was about to hear, Louis turned pale and red by turns. "Do you know this banker?" asked Gaston, who, full of his own thoughts, did not notice his brother's condition.—"Only by reputation."

"Then we can shortly make his acquaintance together, for I think of accompanying you to Paris when you return there to wind up your affairs before establishing yourself here."

At this unexpected announcement of a step which would prove his utter ruin, Louis managed to maintain his self-possession. It seemed to him that his brother was looking him through and through. "You are going to Paris?" he uttered.—"Certainly I am. What is there extraordinary in that?"—"Oh! nothing."—"I hate Paris, although I have never been there; but I am called there by interest, by sacred duties," he hesitatingly said. "The truth is, I understand that Mademoiselle de la Verberie lives in Paris, and I wish to see her again."—"Ah!"

Gaston was silent and thoughtful for some moments, and then resumed, nervously: "I can tell you, Louis, why I wish to see her. When I went away, I left our mother's jewels in her keeping."—"And you intend, after a lapse of twenty-three years, to claim these jewels?"—"Yes—or rather no; that is only a vain excuse for seeing her, with which I try to satisfy myself. I must see her, because—because—I loved her; that is the truth."—"But how will you find her?"—"Oh! that is easy

enough. Any one can tell me her husband's name, and then I will go to see her. I will write to-morrow, to Beaucaire, for the information."

Louis made no reply. Men of his character, when brought face to face with imminent danger, always weigh their words, and say as little as possible, for fear of committing themselves by some indiscreet remark. Above all things, Louis was careful to avoid raising any objections to his brother's proposed trip to Paris. To oppose a man's wishes has generally the effect of fixing them more firmly in his mind. Each argument is like striking a nail with a hammer. Knowing this, Louis changed the conversation, and nothing more during the day was said of Valentine or Paris. At night, alone in his room, he brought his cunning mind to bear upon the difficulties of his situation, and wondered by what means he could extricate himself. During the twenty years Louis had been at war with society, trusted by none, living upon his wits and the credulity of foolish men, he had, many a time, found himself in a desperate position. He had been caught at the gaming-table with his hands full of marked cards; he had been tracked all over Europe by the police, and obliged to fly from city to city under an assumed name; he had sold to cowards his skilful handling of the sword and pistol; he had been thrown into a prison, and miraculously made his escape. He had braved everything, and feared nothing. He had often conceived and carried out the most criminal plans without the slightest hesitation or remorse. And now here he sat, utterly bewildered—unable to think clearly; his usual impudence and ready cunning seemed to have deserted him. Thus driven into a corner, he saw no means of escape, and was almost tempted to give in, and retire from the struggle. He asked himself if it would not be wiser to borrow a large sum from Gaston and fly the country. Fatally, inevitably, he was about to be caught in a trap laid by himself. He had to fear the wrath of M. Fauvel, his wife, and niece. Gaston would have speedy vengeance the moment he discovered the truth; and Raoul, his accomplice, would certainly turn against him in the hour of misfortune, and become his most implacable enemy. Was there no possible way of preventing a meeting between Valentine and Gaston? No, none that he could think of. And their meeting would be his destruction.

Daybreak found him sitting at the window, exposing to the morning breeze his burning brow, which seemed on the point

of bursting. "It is useless for me to think," he muttered. "There is nothing to be done but gain time, and wait for an opportunity." The fall of the horse at Clameran was, no doubt, what Louis called "an opportunity." He closed the window, threw himself upon the bed, and so accustomed was he to danger that he soon slept. At the breakfast-table his calm, smiling face bore no traces of a wakeful, anxious night. He was in a gayer, more talkative, and affectionate mood than usual, and said he would like to ride about the country. Before leaving the table he had planned several excursions in the neighborhood. The truth is, he hoped to keep Gaston so amused and occupied that he would forget all about going to Paris in search of Valentine. He thought that, with time, and skilfully put objections, he could dissuade his brother from seeking out his former love. He relied upon being able to convince him that this absolutely unnecessary interview would be painful to both, embarrassing to him, and dangerous to her. As to the jewels, if Gaston persisted in claiming them, Louis could safely offer to go and get them for him, as he well knew where they were. But his hopes and plans were soon scattered to the winds.

"You know," said Gaston one morning, "I have written." Louis knew well enough to what he alluded, but pretended to be very much surprised, and said: "Written? To whom? Where? What for?"—"To Beaucaire, to ask Lafourcade the name of Valentine's husband."—"You are, then, still thinking of her?"—"Always."—"You have not given up your idea of going to see her?"—"Not in the least."

"Alas! brother, you forget that she whom you once loved is now the wife of another, and possibly the mother of a family. How do you know that she will consent to see you? Why run the risk of destroying her domestic happiness and planting seeds of remorse in your own bosom?"—"I know I am a fool, but my folly is dear to me."

The quiet determination of Gaston's tone convinced Louis that all remonstrances would be unavailing. Yet he remained the same in his manner and behavior, apparently engrossed in pleasure parties; but, in reality, his only thought was of the letters delivered at the house. He always managed to be near the door when the postman came. When he and Gaston were out together at the time of the postman's visit, he would hurry into the house first, so as to look over the letters delivered in their absence. His watchfulness was at last rewarded. The

following Sunday, among the letters handed to him by the postman, was one bearing the postmark of Beaucaire. He quickly slipped it into his pocket; and, although he was on the point of mounting his horse, to ride with Gaston, he found a pretext for running up to his room, so as to gratify his impatient desire to read the letter. He tore it open, and, seeing "Lafourcade" signed at the bottom of three closely written pages, hastily devoured the contents. After reading a detailed account of events entirely uninteresting to him, Louis came to the following passage relating to Valentine: "Mademoiselle de la Verberie's husband is an eminent banker, named Andre Fauvel. I have not the honor of his acquaintance, but I intend going to see him shortly. I am anxious to submit to him a project that I have conceived for the benefit of this part of the country. If he approves of it, I shall ask him to invest in it, as his name will be of great assistance to the scheme. I suppose you have no objections to my mentioning your name as a reference." Louis trembled like a man who had just had a narrow escape from death. He well knew that he would have to fly if Gaston received this letter. But though the danger was warded off for the while, it might return and destroy him at any moment. Gaston would wait a week or so for an answer, then he would write again; Lafourcade would instantly reply to express surprise that his first letter had not been received; all this correspondence would occupy, at the most, not more than twelve days. And then, Lafourcade's visit to Paris was another source of danger, for the instant he mentioned the name of De Clameran to the banker, everything would be discovered.

But Gaston was getting tired of waiting. "Are you coming?" he cried.—"I am coming now," replied Louis.

Hastily thrusting Lafourcade's letter into a secret compartment of his trunk, Louis ran down to his brother. He had made up his mind to borrow a large sum from Gaston, and go off to America; and Raoul might get out of the scrape as best he could. The only thing which he regretted was the sudden failure of the most skilful combination he had ever conceived; but he was not a man to fight against destiny, so he determined to make the best of the emergency, and hope for better fortune in his next scheme. The following day, about dusk, while walking along the pretty road leading from the foundry to Oloron, he commenced the prologue of a little story, which was to conclude by asking Gaston to lend him two hundred thousand

francs. As they went slowly along, arm in arm, about half mile from the foundry they met a young laborer, who bow as he passed them. Louis started back so violently that his brother asked him in surprise what was the matter. "Nothing, except I struck my foot against a stone, and it hurt me."

Gaston might have known, by the tremulous tones of Louis's voice, that this was a lie. Louis de Clameran had reason to tremble, for in the workman he recognized Raoul de Lagors. Instinctive fear paralyzed and overwhelmed him. His volubility was gone; and he silently walked along by his brother's side, like an automaton, totally incapable of thinking or acting for himself. He seemed to listen—he did listen; but the words fell upon his ear unmeaningly; he could not understand what Gaston was saying, and mechanically answered "yes" or "no," like one in a dream. While necessity—absolute necessity—kept him at Gaston's side, his thoughts were all with the young man who had just passed by. What had brought Raoul to Oloron? What plot was he hatching? Why was he disguised as a laborer? Why had he not answered the many letters which Louis had written him from Oloron? He had ascribed this silence to Raoul's carelessness, but now he saw it was premeditated. Something disastrous must have happened at Paris; and Raoul, afraid to commit himself by writing, had come himself to bring the bad news. Had he come to say that the game was up, and they must fly? But, after all, he might have been mistaken. Perhaps it was some workman bearing a strong resemblance to Raoul. If he could only run after the stranger and speak to him! His anxiety increased minute by minute, and at length became intolerable. Fortunately, Gaston was rather tired that evening, and returned home much earlier than usual. He went to his own room at once. At last Louis was free! He lit a cigar, and, telling the servant not to sit up for him, went out. He expected that Raoul, if it was Raoul, would be prowling near the house, waiting for him. He was not mistaken. He had hardly proceeded thirty yards when a man suddenly sprang from behind a tree and stood before him. The night was clear, and Louis at once recognized Raoul.

"What is the matter?" he impatiently demanded; "what has happened?"—"Nothing."—"What! Do you mean to say that nothing has gone wrong in Paris?"—"Nothing whatever. I will add, too, that, but for your inordinate greed of gain, everything would be going on swimmingly."—"Then why have you

come here?" cried Louis fiercely. "Who gave you permission to desert your post, at the risk of ruining us both?"—"That is my business," said Raoul coolly.

Louis seized the young man's wrists, and almost crushed them in his vise-like grasp. "Explain this strange conduct of yours," he exclaimed in a tone of suppressed rage. Without apparent effort, Raoul released his hands from their imprisonment, and jeeringly said: "Gently, my friend! I don't like being roughly treated, and I have other means of answering you." At the same time he drew a revolver from his pocket.

"You must and shall explain yourself," insisted Louis; "if you don't."—"Well, if I don't? Now you might just as well spare yourself the trouble of trying to frighten me. I intend to answer your questions when I choose; but it certainly won't be here, in the middle of the road, with the bright moonlight showing us off to advantage. How do you know people are not watching us this very minute? Come this way." They strode through the fields, regardless of the plants, which they trampled under foot in order to take a short cut.

"Now," began Raoul when they were at a safe distance from the road, "now, my dear uncle, I will tell you what brings me here. I have received and carefully read your letters, and read them more than once. You wished to be prudent, and the consequence was that your letters were unintelligible. Only one thing did I understand clearly: we are in danger."—"Only the more reason for your watchfulness and obedience."—"Very well put. Only, before braving danger, my venerable and beloved uncle, I want to know its extent. I am not a man to retreat in the hour of peril, but I want to know exactly how much risk I am running."

"Did I not tell you to keep quiet?"

"But to do this would imply that I have perfect confidence in you, my dear uncle," said Raoul, sneeringly.

"And why should you not? What reasons for distrust have you after all that I have done for you? Who went to London, and rescued you from a state of privation and ignominy? I did. Who gave you a name and position when you had neither? I did. And who is working even now to maintain your present life of ease, and insure you a splendid future? I am."

"Superb, magnificent, inimitable!" said Raoul with mocking admiration. "But, while on the subject, why don't you prove that you have sacrificed yourself for my sake? You did not

need me as a tool for carrying out plans for your own benefit; did you? oh, no, not at all! Dear, kind, generous, disinterested uncle! You ought to have the Montyon* prize; I must recommend you for it."

De Clameran was so enraged that he feared to trust himself to speak.

"Now, my good uncle," continued Raoul more seriously, "we had better end this child's play, and come to a clear understanding. I followed you here because I thoroughly understand your character, and have just as much confidence in you as you deserve, and not a particle more. If it were for your advantage to ruin me, you would not hesitate one instant. If danger threatened us, you would fly alone, and leave your dutiful nephew to make his escape the best way he could. Oh! don't look shocked and pretend to deny it; your conduct is perfectly natural, and in your place I would act the same way. Only remember this, that I am not a man to be trifled with. Now let us cease these unnecessary recriminations, and come to the point: what has been happening here?"

Louis saw that his accomplice was too shrewd to be deceived, and that the safest course was to trust all to him, and to pretend that he had intended doing so all along. Without any show of anger, he briefly and clearly related all that had occurred at his brother's. He told the truth about everything except the amount of his brother's fortune, the importance of which he lessened as much as possible.

"Well," said Raoul, when the report was ended, "we are in a nice fix. And you expect to get out of it, do you?"—"Yes, if you don't betray me."—"I wish you to understand, marquis, that I have never betrayed any one yet. What steps will you take to get free of this entanglement?"—"I don't know yet; but something will turn up. Oh, don't be alarmed; I'll find some means of escape: so you can return home with your mind set at rest. You run no risk in Paris, and I will stay here to watch Gaston."

Raoul reflected for some moments, and then said: "Are you sure I am out of danger in Paris?"—"What are you afraid of? We have Madame Fauvel so completely in our power that she would not dare speak a word against us, even if she knew the whole truth, which no one but you and I know: she would not open her lips, but be only too glad to hush up matters, so as

* A prize for virtue awarded by the French Academy.

to escape punishment for her fault from her deceived husband and a censuring world."

"That is so. I know we have a secure hold on her," said Raoul. "It is not of her I am afraid."—"Of whom, then?"—"An enemy of your own making, my respected uncle, a most implacable enemy—Madeleine."—"Fiddlesticks!" replied De Clameran disdainfully.

"It is all very well for you to treat her with contempt," said Raoul gravely; "but I can tell you, you are much mistaken in your estimate of her character. I have studied her lately, and see that she has devoted herself to save her aunt; but she has not given in. She has promised to marry you, she has discarded Prosper, who is broken-hearted, it is true; but she has not given up hope. You imagine her to be weak and yielding, easily frightened? It's a great mistake: she is self-reliant and fearless. More than that, she is in love, my good uncle; and a woman will defend her love as a tigress defends her young."

"She is worth five hundred thousand francs."—"So she is; and at five per cent we would each have an income of twelve thousand five hundred francs. But, for all that, you had better take my advice, and give up Madeleine."—"Never, I swear by heaven!" exclaimed De Clameran. "Rich or poor, she shall be mine! I first wanted her for her money, but now I want *her*—I love her for herself, Raoul!"

Raoul seemed to be amazed at this declaration of his uncle. He raised his hands, and started back with astonishment. "Is it possible," he said, "that you are in love with Madeleine?—you!"—"Yes," replied Louis in a tone of suspicion. "Is there anything so very extraordinary in it?"—"Oh, no; certainly not! only this sentimental state you are in explains your strange behavior. So, you love Madeleine! Then, my venerable uncle, we may as well surrender at once."—"Why so?"—"Because you know the axiom, 'When the heart is interested, the head is lost.' The day is not far off when your infatuation for Madeleine will make you sell us both for a smile. And, mark my words, she is shrewd, and watching us as only an enemy can watch."

With a forced laugh De Clameran interrupted his nephew. "Just see how you fire up for nothing," he said. "You must dislike the charming Madeleine, then, very much."—"She will prove to be our ruin; that is all."—"You might as well be frank, and say you are in love with her yourself."—"I am only

in love with her money," retorted Raoul with an angry frown.—"Then what are you complaining of? I shall give you half her fortune. You will have the money without being troubled with the wife; the profit without the burden."

"I am not over fifty years old," said Raoul conceitedly.—"Enough of this," interrupted Louis angrily. "The day I relieved your pressing wants, and brought you to Paris, it was agreed that I should be the master."—"Yes; but you forget that my liberty, perhaps my life, is at stake. You may hold the cards, but I must have the right of advising you."

It was midnight before the accomplices separated. "It won't do to stand idle," said Louis. "I agree with you that something must be done at once; but I can't decide what it shall be on the spur of the moment. Meet me here at this hour to-morrow night, and I will have some plan ready for you."

"Very good. I will be here."

"And remember, don't be imprudent!"

"My costume ought to convince you that I am not anxious to be recognized by any one. I left such an ingenious alibi, that I defy anybody to prove that I have been absent from the house at Vesinet. I even took the precaution of traveling here third-class. Well, good night; I am going to the inn."

Raoul went off after these words, apparently unconscious of having aroused suspicion in the breast of his accomplice. During his adventurous life, De Clameran had transacted "business" with too many scamps not to know the precise amount of confidence to place in a man like Raoul. He foresaw already a thousand reasons for fear and disputes. "Why," he pondered, "did Raoul assume this disguise? Why this alibi at Paris? Can he be laying a trap for me? It is true that I have a hold upon him; but, then, I am completely at his mercy. Those accursed letters which I have written to him, while here, are so many proofs against me. Can he be thinking of cutting loose from me and making off with all the profits of our enterprise?"

Louis never once during the night closed his eyes; but by daybreak he had fully made up his mind how to act, and with feverish impatience waited for night. His anxiety made him so restless that the unobserving Gaston finally noticed it, and asked him what the matter was; if he was ill, or troubled about anything. At last evening came, and Louis was able to join Raoul, whom he found lying on the grass, smoking in the field where they had talked on the preceding evening.

"Well," he carelessly asked, as Louis approached, "have you decided upon anything?"—"Yes, I have two projects, either of which is, I think, sure of success."—"I am listening."

Louis was silent for a minute, as if arranging his thoughts so as to present them as clearly and briefly as possible. "My first plan," he began, "depends upon your approval. What would you say if I proposed to you to give up the affair altogether?"—"What!"—"Would you consent to disappear, leave France, and return to London, if I paid you a good round sum?"—"What do you call a good round sum?"—"I could give you a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"My respected uncle," said Raoul, with a contemptuous shrug, "I am distressed to see how little you know me! You try to deceive me, to outwit me, which is ungenerous and foolish on your part—ungenerous, because it fails to carry out your agreement; foolish, because, as you ought to know by now, my power equals yours."—"I don't understand you."—"I am sorry for it. I understand myself, and that is sufficient. Oh, I know you, my dear uncle! I have watched you with careful eyes, which are not to be deceived; I see through you clearly. If you offer me one hundred and fifty thousand francs, it is because you intend to walk off with a million for yourself."

"You are talking like a fool," said De Clameran, with virtuous indignation.—"Not at all; I only judge the future by the past. Of all the large sums extorted from Madame Fauvel, often against my wishes, I have scarcely received a tenth part."—"But you know we have a reserve fund."

"All very good; but you have the keeping of it, my good uncle. If our little plot were to be discovered to-morrow, you would walk off with the money-box, and leave your devoted nephew to be sent to prison."—"Ungrateful fellow!" muttered Louis, as if distressed at these undeserved reproaches.—"Bravo!" cried Raoul; "you said it splendidly. But we have not time for this nonsense. I will end the matter by proving how you have been trying to deceive me."

"I would like to hear you do so, if you can."—"Very good. In the first place, you told me that your brother only possessed a modest competency. Now, I learn that Gaston has an income of at least sixty thousand francs; it is useless for you to deny it. And how much is this property worth? A hundred thousand crowns. He has four hundred thousand francs deposited in M. Fauvel's bank. Total, seven hundred thousand francs.

And besides all this, the broker in Oloron has instructions to buy up a large amount of government stock for him. I have not wasted my day, as you see."

Raoul's information was too concise and exact for Louis to deny it. "You might have sense enough," Raoul went on, "to know how to manage your forces if you undertake to be a commander. We had a splendid game in our hands; and you, who held the cards, have made a perfect muddle of it."

"I think—"

"That the game is lost? That is my opinion too, and all through you."—"I could not control events."

"Yes, you could, if you had been shrewd. What did we agree upon in London? We were to implore my good mother to assist us a little, and if she complied with our wishes, we were to be flattering and affectionate in our devotion to her; but, at the risk of killing the golden goose, you have made me torment the poor woman until she is almost crazy."

"It was prudent to hasten matters."—"You think so, do you? Was it also to hasten matters that you took it into your head to marry Madeleine? That made it necessary to let her into the secret; and, ever since, she has advised and set her aunt against us. I would not be surprised if she makes her confess everything to M. Fauvel, or even inform against us at the Prefecture of Police."

"I love Madeleine!"—"You told me that before. And suppose you do love her. You led me into this piece of business without having studied its various bearings—without knowing what you were about. No one but an idiot, my beloved uncle, would go and put his foot into a trap, and then say: 'If I had only known about it!' You should have made it your business to know everything. You came to me, and said: 'Your father is dead.' But not at all, he is living: and, after what we have done, I dare not appear before him. He would have left me a million, and now I shall not get a sou. He will find his Valentine, and then good-by."

"Enough!" angrily interrupted Louis. "If I have made a mistake, I know how to redeem it. I can save everything yet."—"You can? How so?"—"That is my secret," said Louis, gloomily.

Louis and Raoul were silent for a minute; and this silence between them, in this lonely spot, at dead of night, was so horribly significant that both of them shuddered. An abominable

thought had flashed across their evil minds, and, without a word or look they understood each other. Louis broke the ominous silence by abruptly saying: "Then you refuse to disappear if I pay you a hundred and fifty thousand francs? Think it over before deciding; it is not too late yet."—"I have fully thought it over. I know you will not attempt to deceive me any more. Between certain ease and the probability of an immense fortune, I choose the latter at all risks. I will share your success or your failure; we will swim or sink together."—"And you will follow my instructions?"—"Blindly."

Raoul must have been very certain of Louis's intentions, for he did not ask him a single question. Perhaps he dared not. Perhaps he preferred doubt to shocking certainty, as if he could thus escape the remorse attendant upon criminal complicity. "In the first place," said Louis, "you must at once return to Paris."—"I will be there in forty-eight hours."—"You must be constantly at Madame Fauvel's and keep me informed of everything that takes place in the family."—"I understand."

Louis laid his hand on Raoul's shoulder, as if to impress upon his mind what he was about to say. "You have a sure means of being restored to your mother's confidence and affection by blaming me for everything that has happened to distress her. Abuse me constantly. The more odious you render me in her eyes and those of Madeleine, the better you will serve me. Nothing would please me more than to be denied admittance to the house when I return to Paris. You must say that you have quarreled with me, and that if I still come to see you, it is because you can not prevent it. That is the scheme: you can develop it."

Raoul listened to these strange instructions with astonishment. "What!" he cried; "you adore Madeleine, and take this means of winning her good graces? An odd way of carrying on a courtship, I must confess! I will be shot if I can comprehend."—"There is no necessity for your comprehending."—"All right," said Raoul, submissively. "If you say so."

"Did you ever hear," Louis asked Raoul, "of the man who burned down his lady-love's house so as to have the bliss of carrying her out in his arms?"—"Yes; what of it?"

"At the proper time, I will charge you to set fire morally to Madame Fauvel's house; and I will rush in and save her and her niece. Now, in the eyes of those women, my conduct will appear more magnanimous and noble in proportion to the con-

tempt and abuse they have heaped upon me. I gain nothing by patient devotion; I have everything to hope from a sudden change of tactics. A well-managed stroke will transform a demon into an angel."

"Very well; a good idea!" said Raoul, approvingly, when his uncle had finished.—"Then you understand what is to be done?"—"Yes; but you will write to me?"—"Of course; and if anything should happen at Paris?"—"I will telegraph to you."—"And never lose sight of my rival, the cashier."—"Prosper? Not much danger of our being troubled by him, poor boy! He is just now my most devoted friend. Trouble has driven him into a path of life which will soon prove his destruction. Every now and then I pity him from the bottom of my soul."—"Pity him as much as you like."

The two men shook hands and separated, apparently the best friends in the world; in reality, the bitterest enemies. Raoul would not forgive Louis for having attempted to appropriate all the booty and leave him in the lurch, when it was he who had risked the greatest dangers. Louis, on his part, was alarmed at the attitude taken by Raoul. Thus far he had found him tractable, and even blindly obedient; and now he had suddenly become rebellious and threatening. Instead of ordering Raoul, he was forced to consult and bargain with him. What could be more wounding to his vanity and self-conceit than the reproaches, well founded though they were, to which he had been obliged to listen from a mere youth? As he walked back to his brother's house, thinking over what had just occurred, Louis swore that sooner or later he would be revenged, and that as soon as he could, he would take means of getting rid of Raoul forever. But for the present he was so afraid of his young accomplice that, according to his promise, he wrote to him the next day, and every succeeding day, full particulars of everything that happened. Seeing how important it was to restore his shaken confidence, Louis entered into the most minute details of his plans. The situation remained the same: the dark cloud hung threateningly near, but grew no larger.

Gaston seemed to have forgotten that he had written to Beaucaire, and never mentioned Valentine's name once. Like all men accustomed to a busy life, Gaston was miserable except when occupied, and spent his whole time in the foundry, which seemed to absorb him entirely. It was losing money when he purchased it; but he determined to work it until it should be

equally beneficial to himself and the neighborhood. He engaged the services of an intelligent engineer, and, thanks to untiring energy and new improvements in machinery, his receipts soon more than equaled his expenses.

"Now that we are doing so well," said Gaston joyously, "we shall certainly make twenty-five thousand francs next year." Next year! Alas, poor Gaston! Five days after Raoul's departure, one Saturday afternoon, Gaston was suddenly taken ill. He had a sort of vertigo, and was so dizzy that he was forced to lie down. "I know what is the matter," he said. "I have often been ill in this way at Rio. A couple of hours' sleep will cure me. I will lie down, and you can send some one to awaken me when dinner is ready, Louis."

But when the servant came to announce dinner, he found Gaston much worse. He had a violent headache, a choking sensation in his throat, and dimness of vision. But his worst symptom was dysphonia; he would try to articulate one word, and find himself using another. His jaw-bones became so stiff that it was with the greatest difficulty that he opened his mouth. Louis came up to his brother's room, and urged him to send for the physician. "No," said Gaston, "I won't have any doctor to make me ill with all sorts of medicines. I know what is the matter with me, and my indisposition will be cured by a simple remedy which I have always used." At the same time he ordered Manuel, his old Spanish servant, who had lived with him for ten years, to prepare him some lemonade.

The next day Gaston apeared to be much better. He ate his breakfast, and was about to take a walk, when the pains of the previous day suddenly returned in a more violent form. Without consulting his brother, Louis sent to Oloron for Dr. C——, whose wonderful cures had won him a wide reputation. The doctor declared that there was no danger, and merely prescribed a dose of valerian, and a blister with some grains of morphine sprinkled on it. But in the middle of the night, all the symptoms suddenly changed for the worse. The pain in the head was succeeded by a fearful oppression, and the sick man suffered torture in trying to get his breath. Daybreak found him still tossing restlessly from pillow to pillow. When Dr. C—— came early in the morning, he appeared very much surprised at this change for the worse. He inquired if they had not used too much morphine. Manuel said that he had put the blister on his master, and the doctor's directions had been

accurately followed. The doctor, after having examined Gaston, and found his breathing heavy and irregular, prescribed leeches and a heavy dose of sulphate of quinine; he then retired, saying he would return the next day. As soon as the doctor had gone, Gaston sent for a friend of his, a lawyer, to come to him as soon as possible.

"For Heaven's sake! what do you want with a lawyer?" inquired Louis.—"I want his advice, brother. It is useless to try and deceive ourselves; I know I am extremely ill. Only timid fools are superstitious about making their wills. I would rather have the lawyer at once, and then my mind will be at rest."

Gaston did not think he was about to die; but, knowing the uncertainty of life, determined to be prepared for the worst. He had too often imperiled his life, and been face to face with death, to feel any fear now. He had made his will while ill at Bordeaux; but now that he had found Louis, he wished to leave him all his property, and sent for his business man to advise as to the best means of disposing of his wealth for his benefit. The lawyer was a shrewd, wiry little man, very popular, and perfectly familiar with all the intricacies of the law. Nothing delighted him more than to succeed in eluding some stringent article of the Code; and he often sacrificed large fees for the sake of outwitting his opponent, and controverting the justness of a decision. Once aware of his client's wishes and intentions, he had but one idea, and that was to carry them out as inexpensively as possible, by skilfully evading the heavy costs to be paid by the inheritor of the estate. He explained to Gaston that he could, by an act of partnership, associate Louis in his business enterprises, by signing an acknowledgment that half of the money invested in these various concerns belonged to and had been advanced by his brother; so that in the event of Gaston's death, Louis would only have to pay taxes on half the fortune. Gaston eagerly took advantage of this fiction; not that he thought of the money saved by the transaction if he died, but this would be a favorable opportunity for sharing his riches with Louis without wounding his delicate sensibility. A deed of partnership between Gaston and Louis de Clameran, for the working of a cast-iron mill, was drawn up; this deed acknowledged Louis to have invested five hundred thousand francs as his share of the capital.

When Louis was called in to sign the paper, he violently opposed his brother's project. "Why do you distress me by

making these preparations for death, merely because you are suffering from a slight indisposition? Do you think that I would consent to accept your wealth during your lifetime? If you die, I am your heir; if you live, I enjoy your property as if it were my own. What more can you wish?"

Vain remonstrances. Gaston was not a man to be persuaded from accomplishing a purpose upon which he had fully set his heart. When, after mature deliberation, he made a resolution, he always carried it out in spite of all opposition. After a long and heroic resistance, which showed great nobleness of character and rare disinterestedness, Louis, urged by the physician, finally yielded, and signed his name to the papers drawn up by the lawyer. It was done. Now he was legally Gaston's partner, and possesser of half his fortune. No court of law could deprive him of what had been deeded with all the legal formalities, even if his brother should change his mind and try to get back his property. The strangest sensations now filled Louis's breast. He was in a state of delirious excitement, often felt by persons suddenly raised from poverty to affluence. Whether Gaston lived or died, Louis was the lawful possessor of an income of twenty-five thousand francs, without counting the eventual profits of the iron-works. At no time in his life had he hoped for or dreamed of such wealth. His wildest wishes were surpassed. What more could he want? Alas! he wanted the power of enjoying these riches in peace: they had come too late. This fortune, fallen from the skies, should have filled his heart with joy, whereas it only made him melancholy and angry. This unlooked-for happiness seemed to have been sent by cruel fate as a punishment for his past sins. Although his conscience told him that he deserved this misery, he blamed Gaston entirely for his present torture. Yes, he held Gaston responsible for the horrible situation in which he found himself. His letters to Raoul for several days expressed all the fluctuations of his mind, and revealed glimpses of coming evil.

"I have twenty-five thousand francs a year," he wrote to him, a few hours after signing the deed of partnership; "and I possess in my own right five hundred thousand francs. One-fourth of this sum would have made me the happiest of men a year ago; now it is of no use to me. All the gold on earth could not remove one of the difficulties of our situation. Yes, you were right. I have been imprudent; but I pay dear for my precipitation. Rich or poor, I have cause to tremble as long

as there is any risk of a meeting between Gaston and Valentine. How can they be kept apart? Will my brother renounce his plan of discovering the whereabouts of this woman whom he so loved?"

No; Gaston would never be turned from his search for his first love, as he proved by calling her in the most beseeching tones when he was suffering his worst paroxysms of pain. He grew no better. In spite of the most careful nursing his symptoms changed, but showed no improvement. Each attack was more violent than the preceding one. Toward the end of the week, however, the pains left his head, and he felt well enough to get up and partake of a slight nourishment. But poor Gaston was a mere shadow of his former self. In one week he had aged ten years. His strong constitution was broken. He, who ten days ago was boasting if his vigorous health, was now weak and bent like an old man. He could hardly drag himself along, and shivered in the warm sun as if he were bloodless. Leaning on Louis's arm, he slowly walked down to look at the forge, and, seating himself before a furnace at full blast, he declared that he felt very much better, that this intense heat revived him. His pains were all gone, and he could breathe without difficulty.

His spirits rose, and he turned to the workmen gathered around, and said cheerfully: "I was not blest with a good constitution for nothing, my friends, and I shall soon be well again."

When the neighbors called to see him, and insisted that this illness was entirely owing to change of climate, Gaston replied that he supposed they were right, and that he ought to return to Rio as soon as he was well enough to travel. What hope this answer roused in Louis's breast! "Yes," he eagerly said, "I will go with you. A trip to Brazil would be charming!"

But the next day Gaston had changed his mind. He told Louis that he felt almost well, and was determined not to leave France. He proposed going to Paris to consult the best physicians, and then he would see Valentine. As his illness increased, he became more surprised and troubled at not hearing from Beaucaire. He wrote again in the most pressing terms, and asked for a reply by return of post. This letter was never received by Lafourcade. That night, Gaston's sufferings returned with renewed violence, and for the first time Dr. C—— was uneasy. A fatal termination seemed possible. Gaston's

pain left him in a measure, but he was growing weaker every moment. His heart beat slower, and his feet were as cold as ice. On the fourteenth day of his illness, after lying in a stupor for several hours, he revived sufficiently to ask for a priest, saying that he would follow the example of his ancestors, and die like a Christian. The priest left him after half an hour's interview, and all the workmen were summoned to receive their master's farewell. Gaston spoke a few kind words to them all, saying that he had provided for them in his will. After they had gone, he made Louis promise to carry on the iron-works, embraced him for the last time, and sank back on his pillow in a dying state. As the bell tolled for noon he quietly breathed his last. Now Louis was in reality Marquis de Clameran, and a millionaire besides. Two weeks later, having made arrangements with the engineer in charge of the iron-works to attend to everything during his absence, he took his seat in the train for Paris. He had sent the following significant telegram to Raoul the night previous: "I arrive to-morrow."

XIX

FAITHFUL to the program laid down by his accomplice, while Louis watched at Oloron, Raoul remained in Paris with the purpose of recovering Madame Fauvel's confidence and affection, and of lulling any suspicions which might have arisen in her breast. The task was difficult, but not impossible. Madame Fauvel had been distressed by Raoul's wild extravagance, but had never ceased to love him. Whatever faults he had committed, whatever future follies he might indulge in, he would always remain her best loved child, her first-born, the living image of her noble, handsome Gaston, the lover of her youth. She adored her two sons, Lucien and Abel; but she could not overcome an indulgent weakness for the unfortunate child, torn from her arms the day of his birth, abandoned to the mercies of hired strangers, and for twenty years deprived of home influences and a mother's love. She

blamed herself for Raoul's misconduct, and accepted the responsibility of it, saying to herself: "It is my fault." Knowing these to be her sentiments, Raoul did not hesitate to take advantage of them. Never were more irresistible fascinations employed for the accomplishment of a wicked object. Beneath an air of innocent frankness, this precocious scoundrel concealed wonderful astuteness and penetration. He could at will adorn himself with the confiding artlessness of youth, so that angels might have yielded to the soft look of his large dark eyes. There were few women living who could have resisted the thrilling tones of his sympathetic voice. During the month of Louis's absence, Madame Fauvel was in a state of comparative happiness. Never had this mother and wife—this pure, innocent woman, in spite of her first and only fault—enjoyed such tranquillity. She felt as one under the influence of enchantment, while reveling in the sunshine of filial love, which almost bore the character of a lover's passion; for Raoul's devotion was ardent and constant, his manner so tender and winning, that any one would have taken him for Madame Fauvel's suitor. As she was still at her country house, and M. Fauvel went to town every morning, she had the whole of her time to devote to Raoul. When she had spent the morning with him at his house in Vesinet, she would often bring him home to dine and spend the evening with her. All his past faults were forgiven, or rather the whole blame of them was laid upon De Clameran; for, now that he was absent, had not Raoul once more become her noble, generous and affectionate son? Raoul enjoyed the life he was leading, and took such an interest in the part that he was playing, that his acting was perfect. He possessed the faculty which makes cheats successful—faith in his own impostures. Sometimes he would stop to think whether he was telling the truth, or acting a shameful comedy. His success was wonderful. Even Madeleine, the prudent, distrustful Madeleine, without being able to shake off her prejudice against the young adventurer, confessed that perhaps she had been influenced by appearances, and had judged unjustly. Raoul never asked for money now. He seemed to live on nothing.

Affairs were in this happy state when Louis arrived from Oloron. Although now immensely rich, he resolved to make no change in his style of living, but returned to his apartments at the Hotel du Louvre. His only outlay was the purchase of

a handsome carriage; and this was driven by Manuel, who consented to enter his service, although Gaston had left him a sufficient sum to support him comfortably. Louis's dream, the height of his ambition, was to be ranked among the great manufacturers of France. He was prouder of being called "iron-founder" than of his marquisate. During his adventurous life, he had met with so many titled gamblers and cut-throats, that he no longer believed in the prestige of nobility. It was impossible to distinguish the counterfeit from the genuine. He thought what was so easily imitated was not worth the having. Dearly bought experience had taught him that our unromantic century attaches no value to armorial bearings, unless their possessor is rich enough to display them upon a splendid coach. One can be a marquis without a marquisate, but it is impossible to be forge-master without owning a forge. Louis now thirsted for the homage of the world. All the badly digested humiliations of the past weighed upon him. He had suffered so much contempt and scorn from his fellow-men, that he burned to avenge himself. After a disgraceful youth, he longed to live a respected and honored old age. His past career disturbed him little. He was sufficiently acquainted with the world to know that the sound of his carriage wheels would silence the jeers of those who knew his former life. These thoughts fermented in Louis's brain as he journeyed from Pau to Paris. He troubled his mind not in the least about Raoul, determining to use him as a tool so long as he needed his services, and then pay him a large sum if he would consent to leave him. All these plans and thoughts were afterward found noted down in the diary which he had in his pocket at the time of the journey.

The first interview between the accomplices took place at the Hotel du Louvre. Raoul, having a practical turn of mind, said he thought that they ought both to be contented with the result already obtained, and that it would be folly to try and secure anything more. "What more do we want?" he asked his uncle. "We now possess over a million; let us divide it and keep quiet. We had better be satisfied with our good luck, and not tempt Providence."

But this moderation did not suit Louis. "I am rich," he replied, "but I desire more than wealth. I am determined to marry Madeleine; I swear she shall be my wife! In the first place, I madly love her; and then, as the nephew of the

most eminent banker in Paris, I at once gain high position and public consideration."—"I tell you, uncle, your courtship will involve you in great risks."—"I don't care if it does. I choose to run them. My intention is to share my fortune with you; but I will not do so till the day after my wedding. Madeleine's dowry will be your share."

Raoul was silent. De Clameran held the money, and was, therefore, master of the situation. "You don't seem to anticipate any difficulty in carrying out your wishes," he resumed, discontentedly; "how are you to account for your suddenly acquired fortune? M. Fauvel knows that a De Clameran lived at Oloron, and had money in his bank. You told him that you never heard of this person bearing your name, and then, at the end of a month, you come and say you have inherited his fortune."

"You are an innocent youth, nephew; your ingenuousness is amusing."—"Explain yourself."—"Certainly. The banker, his wife, and Madeleine must be informed that the De Clameran of Oloron was a natural son of my father, consequently my brother, born at Hamburg, and recognized during the emigration. Of course, he wished to leave his fortune to his own family. This is the story which you must tell Madame Fauvel to-morrow."

"That is a bold step to take."—"How so?"—"Inquiries might be made."—"Who would make them? The banker would not trouble himself to do so. What difference is it to him whether I had a brother or not? My title as heir is legally authenticated; and all he has to do is to pay the money he holds, and there his business ends."

"I am not afraid of his giving trouble."—"Do you think that Madame Fauvel and her niece will ask any questions? Why should they? They have no grounds for suspicion. Besides, they can not take a step without compromising themselves. If they knew all our secrets, I would not have the least fear of their making revelations. They have sense enough to know that they had best keep quiet."

Not finding any other objections to make, Raoul said: "Very well, then, I will obey you; but I am not to call upon Madame Fauvel for any more money, am I?"—"And why not, pray?"—"Because, my uncle, you are rich now."—"Suppose I am rich," replied Louis triumphantly; "what does that matter? Have we not pretended to have quarreled, and have you not abused me sufficiently to justify you in refusing my assistance? Ah! I

foresaw everything, and when I explain my present plan you will say with me, 'Success is certain.'" Louis de Clameran's scheme was very simple, and therefore, unfortunately, presented the strongest chances of success. "We will go back and look at our balance-sheet. As heretofore, my brilliant nephew, you seem to have misunderstood my management of this affair; I will now explain it to you."—"I am listening."

"In the first place, I presented myself to Madame Fauvel, and said, not 'Your money or your life,' but 'Your money or your reputation!' It was a rude blow to strike, but effective. As I expected, she was frightened, and regarded me with the greatest aversion."—"Aversion is a mild term, uncle."—"I know that. Then I brought you upon the scene, and, without flattering you in the least, I must say that your opening act was a perfect success. I was concealed behind the curtain, and saw your first interview; it was sublime! She saw you, and loved you; you spoke a few words, and won her heart."

"And but for you—"—"Let me finish. This was the first act of our comedy. Let us pass to the second. Your extravagant follies—your grandfather would have said your dissoluteness—soon changed our respective situations. Madame Fauvel, without ceasing to worship you—you resemble Gaston *so* closely—was frightened of you. She was so frightened that she was forced to come to me for assistance."—"Poor woman!"

"I acted my part very well, as you must confess. I was grave, cold, indignant, and represented the distressed uncle to perfection. I spoke of the old probity of the De Clamerans, and bemoaned that the family honor should be dragged in the dust by a degenerate descendant. For a short time I triumphed at your expense. Madame Fauvel forgot her former prejudice against me, and soon showed that she esteemed and liked me."

"That was a long time ago."

Louis paid no attention to this ironical interruption. "Now we come to the third act," he went on to say, "the time when Madame Fauvel, having Madeleine for an adviser, nearly judged us at our true value. Oh! you need not flatter yourself that she did not fear and despise us both. If she did not hate you, Raoul, it was because a mother's heart always forgives a sinful child. A mother can despise and worship her son at the same time."

"She has proved it to me in so many touching ways that I—yes, even I, hardened as I am—was moved, and felt remorse."—

"No doubt. I have felt some pangs myself. Where did I leave off? Oh, yes! Madame Fauvel was frightened, and Madeleine, bent on sacrificing herself, had discarded Prosper, and consented to marry me, when Gaston's existence was suddenly revealed to us. And what has happened since? You have succeeded in convincing Madame Fauvel that you are purer than an angel, and that I am blacker than hell. She is blinded by your noble qualities, and she and Madeleine regard me as your evil genius, whose pernicious influence led you astray."

"You are right, my venerated uncle; that is precisely the position you occupy."—"Very good. Now we come to the fifth act, and our comedy needs entire change of scenery. We must veer around."—"Change our tactics?"—"You think it difficult, I suppose? Nothing easier. Listen attentively, for the future depends upon your skilfulness." Raoul leaned back in his chair with folded arms, as if prepared for anything, and said: "I am ready."

"The first thing for you to do," said Louis, "is to go to Madame Fauvel to-morrow, and tell her the story about my natural brother. She will not believe you, but that makes no difference. The important thing is for you to appear convinced of the truth of what you tell her."—"Consider me convinced."

"Five days hence I will call on M. Fauvel, and confirm the notification sent him by my notary at Oloron, that the money deposited in the bank now belongs to me. I will repeat, for his benefit, the story of the natural brother, and ask him to keep the money for me, as I have no occasion for it at present. You, who are so distrustful, my good nephew, may regard this deposit as a guarantee of my sincerity."—"We will talk of that another time. Go on."

"Then I will go to Madame Fauvel, and say: 'Being very poor, my dear madame, necessity compelled me to claim your assistance in the support of my brother's son, who is also yours. This youth is worthless and extravagant.' "—"Thanks, my good uncle."—"He has poisoned your life when he should have added to your happiness; he is a constant anxiety and sorrow to your maternal heart. I have come to offer my regrets for your past trouble, and to assure you that you will have no annoyance in the future. I am now rich, and henceforth take the whole responsibility of Raoul upon myself."—"Is that what you call a scheme?"

"Wait, you will soon see whether it is. After listening to

this speech, Madame Fauvel will feel inclined to throw herself in my arms, by way of expressing her gratitude and joy. She will refrain, however, on account of her niece. She will ask me to relinquish my claim on Madeleine's hand now that I am rich. I will roundly tell her, 'No.' I will make this an opportunity for an edifying display of magnanimity and disinterestedness. I will say, 'Madame, you have accused me of cupidity. I am now able to prove your injustice. I have been infatuated, as every man must be, by the beauty, grace, and intelligence of Mademoiselle Madeleine; and—I love her. If she were penniless, my devotion would only be the more ardent. She has been promised to me, and I must insist upon this one article of our agreement. This must be the price of my silence. And to prove that I am not influenced by her fortune, I give you my sacred promise that the day after the wedding I will send Raoul sufficient to secure him an income of twenty-five thousand francs per annum."

Louis expressed himself with such convincing candor, that Raoul, an artist in knavery, was charmed and astonished. "Beautifully done," he cried, clapping his hands with glee. "That last sentence may create a chasm between Madame Fauvel and her niece. The promise of a fortune for me will most likely bring my mother over to our side."

"I hope so," said Louis with pretended modesty. "And I have strong reasons for hoping so, as I shall be able to furnish the good lady with excellent arguments for excusing herself in her own eyes. You know when some one proposes some little—what shall we call it?—transaction to an honest person, it must be accompanied by justifications sufficient to quiet all qualms of conscience. I shall prove to Madame Fauvel and her niece that Prosper has shamefully deceived them. I shall prove to them that he is cramped by debts, dissipated, and a reckless gambler, openly associating with a woman of no character."

"And very pretty besides, by Jove! You must not neglect to expatiate upon the beauty and fascinations of the adorable Gipsy; that will be your strongest point."—"Don't be alarmed; I shall be more eloquent than a popular divine. Then I will explain to Madame Fauvel that if she really loves her niece, she will persuade her to marry, not an insignificant cashier, but a man of position, a great manufacturer, a marquis, and, more than this, one rich enough to establish you in the world."

Raoul was dazzled by this brilliant prospect. "If you don't decide her, you will at least make her waver," he said.—"Oh! I don't expect a sudden change. I only intend planting the germ in her mind; thanks to you, it will develop, flourish, and bear fruit."—"Thanks to me?"—"Allow me to finish. After making my speeches I shall disappear from the scene, and your rôle will commence. Of course your mother will repeat the conversation to you, and then we can judge of the effect produced. But remember, you must scorn to receive any assistance from me. You must swear that you will brave all privations, want, famine even, rather than accept anything from a base man, whom you hate and despise; a man who— But you know exactly what you are to say. I can rely upon you for good acting."

"No one can surpass me when I am interested in my part. In pathetic rôles I am always a success when I have had time to prepare myself."—"I know you are. But this disinterestedness need not prevent you from resuming your dissipations. You must gamble, bet, and lose more money than you ever did before. You must increase your demands, and say that you must have money at all costs. You need not account to me for any money you can extort from her. All you get is your own, to spend as you please."—"You don't say so! If you mean that—"—"You will expedite matters, I'll be bound."—"I can promise you no time shall be wasted."

"Now listen to what you are to do, Raoul. Before the end of three months you must have exhausted the resources of these two women. You must force from them every franc they can raise, so that they will be wholly unable to procure money to supply your increasing demands. In three months I must find them penniless, absolutely ruined, without even a jewel left."

Raoul was startled at the passionate, vindictive tone of Louis's voice as he uttered these last words. "You must hate these women if you are so determined to make them miserable," he said. "I hate them?" cried Louis. "Can't you see that I madly love Madeleine, love her as only a man of my age can love? Is not her image ever in my mind? Does not the very thought of her fire my heart, and her name burn my lips when I pronounce it?"—"Your great devotion does not prevent you planning the destruction of her present happiness."

"Necessity compels me to do so. Nothing but the most cruel deceptions and the bitterest suffering would ever induce her to

become my wife. The day on which you have led Madame Fauvel and her niece to the extreme edge of the precipice, pointed out its dark depths, and convinced them that they are irretrievably lost, I shall appear, and rescue them. Why, it will be the crowning scene of our drama. I will play my part with such grandeur, such lofty magnanimity, that Madeleine will be touched. When she finds that it is her sweet self, and not her money, that I want, she will soften, and no longer despise me. No true woman can be indifferent to a grand passion. I don't pretend to say that she will love, but she will give herself to me without repugnance; that is all I ask."

Raoul was shocked at the cold-blooded perversity of his uncle; but De Clameran showed his immense superiority in wickedness, and the apprentice admired the master. "You would certainly succeed, uncle," he said, "were it not for the cashier. Prosper will always stand between you and Madeleine; if not in person, certainly in memory."

Louis smiled scornfully, and, throwing away his cigar, which had gone out, said: "I don't mind Prosper, or attach any more importance to him than to that cigar."—"But she loves him."—"So much the worse for him. Six months hence she will despise him; he is already morally ruined, and at the proper time I will make an end of him socially. Do you know whither the road of dissipation leads, my good nephew? Prosper supports Gipsy, who is extravagant; he gambles, keeps fast horses, and gives suppers. Sooner or later he will have a night of bad luck; the losses at baccarat must be paid within twenty-four hours; he will wish to pay, and he—has charge of the banker's safe."

Raoul protested against this insinuation.

"It is useless to tell me that he is honest. I dare say he is. I was honest myself until I learned to gamble. A scamp would have married Madeleine long ago, and sent us flying, bag and baggage. You say she loves him? No one but a coward would be defrauded of the woman he loved and who loved him. Ah, if I had once felt Madeleine's hand tremble in mine, if her rosy lips had once pressed a kiss upon my brow, the whole world could not take her from me. Wo to him who dares stand in my path! As it is, Prosper annoys me, and I intend to suppress him. With your aid I will so cover him with disgrace and infamy that Madeleine will drive every thought of him from her mind."

Louis's tone of rage and vengeance startled Raoul, and made

him regard the affair in a worse light than ever. "You have given me a shameful, dastardly rôle to play," he said after a long pause.—"My honorable nephew has scruples, I suppose," sneered De Clameran.—"Not exactly scruples; yet I confess—"

"That you want to retreat? Rather too late to sing that tune, my friend. You wish to enjoy every luxury, have your pockets filled with gold, cut a fine figure in high society, and remain virtuous. You should have been born with a golden spoon in your mouth then. We must fish in muddy waters, and cleanse ourselves afterward."

"I have never been rich enough to be honest," said Raoul humbly; "but I must say it goes hard with me to torture two defenseless, frightened woman, and ruin the character of a poor devil who regards me as his best friend. It is a low business!"

This resistance exasperated Louis to the last degree. "You are the most absurd, ridiculous fool I ever met," he cried. "An opportunity occurs for us to make an immense fortune. All we have to do is to stretch out our hands and take it; when you must needs prove refractory, like a whimpering baby. Nobody but an ass would refuse to drink when he is thirsty because he sees a little mud at the bottom of the bucket. I suppose you prefer theft on a small scale. And where will your system lead you? To the poor-house or the police-station. You prefer living from hand to mouth, supported by Madame Fauvel, having small sums doled out to you to pay your little gambling debts."

"I am neither ambitious nor cruel."—"And suppose Madame Fauvel dies to-morrow; what will become of you? Will you go cringing up to the widower, and implore him to continue your allowance?"—"Enough said," cried Raoul, angrily interrupting his uncle. "I never had any idea of retreating. I made these objections to show you what infamous work you expect of me, and, at the same time, prove to you that without my assistance you can do nothing."

"I never pretended otherwise."—"Then, my noble uncle, we might as well settle what my share is to be. Oh! it is not worth while for you to indulge in idle protestations. What will you give me in case of success? and what if we fail?"

"I told you before. I will give you twenty-five thousand francs a year, and all you can secure between now and my wedding-day."—"This arrangement suits me very well; but where are your securities?" This question was discussed a

long time without being satisfactorily settled by the accomplices, who had every reason to distrust each other. "What are you afraid of?" asked De Clameran.—"Everything," replied Raoul. "Where am I to obtain justice if you deceive me? From this pretty little poniard? No, thank you. I would be made to pay as dear for your hide as for that of honest man."

Finally, after a long debate and much recrimination, the matter was arranged, and they shook hands before separating. Alas! Madame Fauvel and her niece soon felt the evil effects of the understanding between the villains. Everything happened as Louis had arranged. Once more, when Madame Fauvel had begun to breathe freely, and to hope that her troubles were over, Raoul's conduct suddenly changed; he became more extravagant and dissipated than ever. Formerly, Madame Fauvel would have said: "I wonder what he does with all the money I give him?" Now, she saw where it went. Raoul was reckless in his wickedness; he was intimate with actresses, openly lavishing money and jewelry upon them; he drove about with four horses, and bet heavily on every race. Never had he been so exacting and exorbitant in his demands for money; Madame Fauvel had the greatest difficulty in supplying his wants. He no longer made excuses and apologies for spending so much; instead of coaxingly entreating, he demanded money as a right, threatening to betray Madame Fauvel to her husband if she refused him. At this rate, all that she and Madeleine possessed soon disappeared. In one month, all their money had been squandered. Then they were compelled to resort to the most shameful expedients in the household expenses. They economized in every possible way, making purchases on credit, and making tradesmen wait; then they changed figures in the bills, and even invented accounts of things never bought. These imaginary costly whims increased so rapidly that M. Fauvel one day said, with a smile: "You are becoming very coquettish, my dears." Poor women! For months they had bought nothing, but had lived upon the remains of their former splendor, having all their old dresses altered to keep up appearances in society. More clear-sighted than her aunt, Madeleine saw plainly that the day would soon come when everything would be discovered. Although she knew that the sacrifices of the present would avail nothing in the future, she was silent. A high-minded delicacy made her conceal her apprehensions beneath an assumed calmness. The

fact of her sacrificing herself made her refrain from uttering anything like a complaint or censure. "As soon as Raoul sees we have nothing more to give," she would say to her aunt, "he will come to his senses, and stop all this extravagance." The day came, however, when Madame Fauvel and Madeleine found it impossible to give another franc. The previous evening there had been a dinner-party, and they, with difficulty, scraped together enough money to defray the expenses. Raoul appeared, and said that he was in the greatest need of money, being forced to pay a debt of two thousand francs at once. In vain they implored him to wait a few days, until they could, with propriety, ask M. Fauvel for money.

"But I have no way of getting it for you," said Madame Fauvel, desperately; "you have taken everything from me. I have nothing left but my diamonds: do you want them? If they can be of use, take them."

Hardened as the young villain was, he blushed at these words. He felt pity for this unfortunate woman, who had always been so kind and indulgent to him—who had so often lavished upon him her maternal caresses. He felt for the noble girl, who was the innocent victim of a vile plot. But he was bound by his promise; he knew that a powerful hand would save these women at the brink of the precipice. More than this, he saw an immense fortune at the end of his road of crime, and quieted his conscience by saying that he would redeem his present cruelty by honest kindness in the future. Stifling his better impulses, he said harshly to Madame Fauvel: "Give me the jewels; I will take them to the pawnbroker's." She handed him a box containing a set of diamonds. It was a present from her husband the day he became worth a million. And so pressing was the want of these women who were surrounded by princely luxury, with their ten servants, beautiful horses, and jewels which were the admiration of Paris, that they implored him to bring them some of the money which he would procure on the diamonds. He promised, and kept his word. But they had revealed a new source—a mine to be worked; he took advantage of it. One by one all Madame Fauvel's jewels followed the way of the diamonds; and, when hers was all gone, those belonging to Madeleine were given up. Madame Fauvel had no defense against the scoundrels who were torturing her, save prayers and tears; these availed her little. Sometimes, though, she betrayed such heart-broken

suffering when Raoul begged her for money which she had no means of obtaining that he would hurry away disgusted at his own brutal conduct, and say to De Clameran: "You must end this dirty business; I can not stand it any longer. Let us steal with both hands as much as you like; but as to killing by agony and fright these two poor miserable women, whom I am really fond of, I am not going to do it."

De Clameran showed no surprise at these remonstrances. "It is not pleasant, I know," he replied; "but necessity knows no law. Have a little more perseverance and patience; we have almost got to the end."

The end was nearer than De Clameran supposed. Toward the latter part of November, Madame Fauvel saw that it was impossible to postpone the catastrophe any longer, and as a last effort determined to apply to the marquis for assistance. She had not seen him since his return from Oloron, except once, when he came to announce his accession to wealth. At that time, persuaded that he was Raoul's evil genius, she had received him very coldly, and did not invite him to repeat his visit. She hesitated before speaking to her niece of the step she intended taking, because she feared violent opposition. To her great surprise Madeleine warmly approved of it. Trouble had made her keen-sighted and suspicious. Reflecting on the past events, comparing and weighing every act and speech of Raoul, she was now convinced that he was De Clameran's tool. She thought that Raoul was too shrewd to be acting in this shameful way, ruinously to his own interests, if there were not some secret motive at the bottom of it all. She saw that this persecution was more feigned than real. So thoroughly was she convinced of this that, had it only concerned herself alone, she would have firmly resisted the oppression, confident that the threatened exposure would never take place. Recalling, with a shudder, certain looks of De Clameran, she guessed the truth, that the object of all this underhand work was to force her to become his wife. Determined on making the sacrifice, in spite of her repugnance toward the man, she wished to have the deed done at once; anything was preferable to the intolerable existence which Raoul made her lead. She felt that her courage might fail if she waited and suffered much longer.

"The sooner you see M. de Clameran the better for us, aunt," she said, after talking the project over.

The next day Madame Fauvel called on the marquis at the Hotel du Louvre, having sent him a note announcing her intended visit. He received her with cold, studied politeness, like a man who had been misunderstood and had been unjustly wounded. After listening to her report of Raoul's scandalous behavior, he became very indignant, and swore that he would soon make him repent of his heartlessness. But, when Madame Fauvel told him that Raoul applied to her because he would take nothing from his uncle, De Clameran seemed confounded.

"The worthless rascal!" he exclaimed, "the idea of his audacity. Why, during the last four months, I have given him more than twenty thousand francs, which I would not have done except to prevent him from applying to you, as he constantly threatened to do." Seeing an expression of doubt upon Madame Fauvel's face, Louis arose and took from a desk some receipts signed by Raoul, which he showed her. The total amount was twenty-three thousand five hundred francs. Madame Fauvel was shocked and amazed.

"He has obtained about forty thousand francs from me," she faintly said, "so that altogether he has spent at least sixty thousand francs in four months."—"I can't imagine what he does with it," said De Clameran, "unless he spends it on actresses."—"Good heavens! what can those creatures do with all the money lavished on them?"—"That is a thing one never knows."

He appeared to pity Madame Fauvel sincerely; he promised that he would at once see Raoul, and make him alter his behavior. Finally, after many protestations of friendship, he wound up by placing his fortune at her disposal. Although Madame Fauvel refused his offer, she appreciated the kindness of it, and on returning home said to Madeleine: "Perhaps we have mistaken his character; he may be a good man after all." Madeleine sadly shook her head. She had anticipated just what happened. De Clameran's magnanimity and generosity confirmed her presentiments.

Raoul called on his uncle, and found him radiant. "Everything is going on swimmingly, my smart nephew," said the marquis; "your receipts act like a charm. Ah, you are a partner worth having. I congratulate you upon your success. Forty thousand francs in four months!"

"Yes," said Raoul carelessly. "I got about that much from her and the pawnbrokers."—"Hang it! Then you must have

a nice little sum laid by; for the young lady, I presume, is a myth."—"That is my business, uncle. Remember our agreement. I can tell you this much: Madame Fauvel and Madeleine have turned everything they can into money; they have nothing left, and I have had enough of my rôle."

"Your rôle is ended. I forbid you to hereafter ask for a single centime."—"What are you about to do? What has happened?"—"The mine is loaded, nephew, and I am only awaiting an opportunity to set fire to it."

Louis de Clameran relied upon making his rival, Prosper Bertomy, furnish him with this ardently desired opportunity. He loved Madeleine too passionately to feel aught save the bitterest hate toward the man whom she had freely chosen, and who still possessed her heart. De Clameran knew that he could marry her at once if he chose; but in what way? By holding a sword of terror over her head, and forcing her to be his. He became frenzied at the idea of possessing her person, while her heart and soul would always be with Prosper. Thus he swore that, before marrying, he would so cover Prosper with shame and ignominy that no honest person would speak to him. He had at first thought of killing him, but he preferred to disgrace him. He imagined that there would be no difficulty in ruining the unfortunate young man. He soon found himself mistaken. Though Prosper led a life of reckless dissipation, he preserved order in his disorder. If in a state of miserable entanglement, and obliged to resort to all sorts of makeshifts to escape his creditors, his caution prevented the world from knowing it. Vainly did Raoul, with his pockets full of gold, tempt him to play high; every effort to hasten his ruin failed. When he played he did not seem to care whether he lost or won; nothing aroused him from his cold indifference. His mistress, Nina Gipsy, was extravagant, but her devotion to Prosper restrained her from going beyond certain limits. Raoul's great intimacy with Prosper enabled him to fully understand the state of his mind; that he was trying to drown his disappointment in excitement, but had not given up all hope.

"You need not hope to beguile Prosper into committing any serious piece of folly," said Raoul to his uncle; "his head is as cool as an usurer's. What object he has in view I know not. Perhaps when he has spent his last coin he will blow his brains out; he certainly never will descend to any dishonorable act; he will never have recourse to the money in the banker's safe."

"We must urge him on," replied De Clameran; "lead him into more extravagances; make Gipsy call on him for costly finery, lend him plenty of money." Raoul shook his head, as if convinced that his efforts would be in vain. "You don't know Prosper, uncle; we can't galvanize a dead man. Madeleine killed him the day she discarded him. He takes no interest in anything on the face of the earth."—"We can wait."

They did wait; and, to the great surprise of Madame Fauvel, Raoul once more became an affectionate and dutiful son, as he had been during De Clameran's absence. From reckless extravagance he changed to great economy. Under pretext of saving money, he remained at Vesinet, although it was very uncomfortable and disagreeable there in the winter. He wished, he said, to expiate his sins in solitude. The truth was that, by remaining in the country, he insured his liberty, and escaped his mother's visits. It was about this time that Madame Fauvel, charmed with the improvement in Raoul, asked her husband to give him some employment in the bank. M. Fauvel was delighted to please his wife, and at once offered Raoul the place of corresponding clerk, with a salary of five hundred francs a month. The appointment pleased Raoul; but, in obedience to De Clameran's command, he refused it, saying he had no taste for banking. This refusal so provoked the banker that he rather bitterly reproached Raoul, and told him not to expect him to do anything to assist him in future. Raoul seized this pretext for ostensibly ceasing his visits. When he wanted to see his mother, he would come in the afternoon or evening, when he knew that M. Fauvel would be from home; and he only came often enough to keep himself informed of what was going on in the household. This sudden lull after so many storms appeared ominous to Madeleine. She was more certain than ever that the plot was now ripe, and would suddenly burst upon them, without warning. She did not impart her presentiment to her aunt, but prepared herself for the worst.

"What can they be doing?" Madame Fauvel would say; "can they have decided not to persecute us any more?"—"Yes, what can they be doing?" Madeleine would murmur.

Louis and Raoul gave no signs of life, because, like expert hunters, they were silently hiding, and watching for a favorable opportunity of pouncing upon their victims. Never losing sight of Prosper for a day, Raoul had exhausted every effort of his fertile mind to compromise his honor—to ensnare him into

some inextricable entanglement. But, as he had foreseen, the cashier's indifference offered little hope of success. De Clameran began to grow impatient at this delay, and had fully determined to bring matters to a crisis himself, when one night, about three o'clock, he was aroused by Raoul. He knew that some event of great importance must have happened to make his nephew come to him at that hour of the night.

"What is the matter?" he anxiously inquired.—"Perhaps nothing; perhaps everything. I have just left Prosper."—"Well?"—"I had him, Madame Gipsy, and three other friends to dine with me. After dinner, I made up a game of baccarat, but Prosper took no interest in it, although he was quite tipsy."

"You must be drunk yourself, to come here waking me up in the middle of the night to hear this idle gabble," said Louis, angrily.—"Now, wait until you hear the rest."—"Zounds! speak then!"—"After the game was over, we went to supper; Prosper became quite intoxicated, and betrayed the word with which he closes the money safe."

At these words, De Clameran uttered a cry of triumph. "What was the word?"—"His mistress's name."—"Gipsy! Yes, that would be five letters." Louis was so excited that he jumped out of bed, slipped on his dressing-gown, and began to stride up and down the room. "Now we have got him!" he said, with vindictive satisfaction. "There's no chance of escape for him now! Ah! the virtuous cashier won't touch the money confided to him; so we must touch it for him. His disgrace will be just as great no matter who opens the safe. We have the word; you know where the key is kept."—"Yes; when M. Fauvel goes out he always leaves the key in a drawer of his secretary in his bedroom."

"Very good. You will go and get this key from Madame Fauvel. If she does not give it up willingly, use force; then, having got the key, you will open the safe, and take out every franc it contains. Ah! Master Bertomy, you shall pay dear for being loved by the woman I love!"

For five minutes De Clameran indulged in such a tirade of abuse against Prosper, mingled with rhapsodies of love for Madeleine, that Raoul thought him almost out of his mind, and tried to calm him. "Before crying victory," he said, "you had better consider the drawbacks and difficulties. Prosper might change the word to-morrow."—"Yes, he might; but it is not

probable he will. He will forget what he said while drunk; besides, we will be quiet."

"That is not all. M. Fauvel has given orders that no large sum shall be kept in the safe overnight; before closing time, everything is sent to the Bank of France."—"A large sum will be kept there the night I choose."—"You think so?"

"I think this: I have a hundred thousand crowns deposited with M. Fauvel; and if I desire the money to be paid over to me early some morning, directly the bank is opened, of course the money will be kept in the safe the previous night."—"A splendid idea!" cried Raoul, admiringly.

It was a good idea; and the plotters spent several hours in studying its strong and weak points. Raoul feared that he would never be able to overcome Madame Fauvel's resistance; and, even if she yielded the key, would she not go directly and confess everything to her husband, rather than sacrifice an innocent man? But Louis felt no uneasiness on this score. "One sacrifice necessitates another," he said; "she has made too many to draw back at the last one. She sacrificed her adopted daughter; therefore she will sacrifice a young man, who is, after all, a comparative stranger to her."

"But Madeleine will never believe any harm of Prosper; therefore—"

"You talk like an idiot, my verdant nephew!"

Before the conversation had ended, the plan seemed feasible. The scoundrels made all their arrangements, and fixed the day for committing the crime. They selected the evening of the 27th of February, because Raoul knew that M. Fauvel would be dining out, and Madeleine was invited to a party on that evening. Unless something unforeseen should occur, Raoul knew that he would find Madame Fauvel alone at half-past eight o'clock.

"I will ask M. Fauvel this very day," said De Clameran, "to have my money ready for Tuesday."—"That is a very short notice, uncle," objected Raoul. "You know there are certain forms to be gone through, and he can claim a longer time wherein to pay it over."

"That is true, but our banker is proud of always being prepared to pay any amount of money, no matter how large; and if I say I am pressed, and would like to be accommodated on Tuesday, he will make a point of having it ready for me. Then you must ask Prosper, as a personal favor to you, to have the money on hand at the opening of the bank."

Raoul once more examined the situation, to discover if there was not the grain of sand which so often becomes a mountain at the last moment. "Prosper and Gipsy are to be with me at Vesinet this evening," he said; "but I can not ask him anything until I know the banker's answer. As soon as you have arranged matters with him, send me word by Manuel."

"I can't send Manuel, for an excellent reason—he has left me; but I can send another messenger." What Louis said was true; Manuel was gone. He had insisted on keeping Gaston's old servant in his service, because he thought it imprudent to leave him at Oloron, where his gossiping might cause trouble. He soon became annoyed by Manuel's loyalty, and determined to rid himself of him; so he just gave him the idea of ending his days in peace in his own country. The evening before Manuel had started for Arenys-de-Mar, a little port of Catalonia, his native place; and Louis was seeking another servant. After breakfasting together, Louis and Raoul separated. De Clameran was so elated by the prospect of success that he lost sight of the great crime intervening. Raoul was calm, but resolute. The shameful deed he was about to commit would give him riches, and release him from a shameful servitude. His one thought was liberty, as Louis's was Madeleine. Everything seemed to progress finely. The banker did not ask for the delay he was entitled to, but promised to pay the money on the day named. Prosper said he would have it ready early in the morning. The certainty of success made Louis almost wild with joy. He counted the hours and the minutes.

"When this affair is ended," he said to Raoul, "I will reform, and be a model of virtue. No one will dare hint that I have ever indulged in any sins—great or small."

But Raoul became more and more sad as the time approached. Reflection gradually showed him the blackness of the contemplated crime. Raoul was bold and determined in the pursuit of his own gratifications and wickedness; he could smile in the face of his best friend, while cheating him of his last napoleon at cards; and he could sleep well after stabbing his enemy to the heart; but he was young. He was young in sin. Vice had not yet penetrated to his marrow-bones—corruption had not yet crowded into his soul enough to uproot and destroy every generous sentiment. It had not been so very long since he had cherished a few holy beliefs. The good intentions of his boyhood were not quite obliterated from his sometime reproachful

memory. Possessing the daring courage natural to youth, he despised the cowardly part forced upon him; this dark plot—this slow agony of two helpless women, filled him with horror and disgust. Disgusted by Louis's cool villainy, he longed for some great peril to be braved, so as to excuse himself in his own eyes. But no; he well knew that he ran no risk, not even that of being arrested and sent to prison. For he was certain that, if M. Fauvel discovered everything, he would do his utmost to hush up every fact connected with the disgraceful story. Although he was careful not to breathe it to De Clameran, he felt a sincere affection for Madame Fauvel, and was touched by the indulgent fondness which she so unchangingly lavished upon him. He had been happy at Vesinet, while his accomplice, or rather his master, was at Oloron. He would have been glad to lead an honest life, and could not see the sense of committing a crime when there was no necessity for it. He hated De Clameran, who abused his power for the sake of gratifying a selfish passion; and he longed for an opportunity of thwarting his plots, if it could be done without also ruining himself. His resolution, which had been so firm in the beginning, was growing weaker and weaker as the hours rolled on; as the crisis approached, his horror of the deed increased. And yet Louis never left him, but continually painted for him a dazzling future, position, wealth, and freedom. He prepared, and forced his accomplice to rehearse, the scene which was to be enacted at Madame Fauvel's, with as much coolness and precision as if it were to be performed at a public theatre. Louis said that no piece could be well acted unless the actor was interested, and imbued with the spirit of his rôle. But the more urgently Louis pressed upon him the advantages to be derived from success—the oftener he sounded in his ears the magic words "five hundred thousand francs," the more loudly did Raoul's conscience cry out against the sinful deed. On Monday evening, about six o'clock, Raoul felt so depressed and miserable that he asked himself whether, even if he wished it, he would be able to obey.

"Are you afraid?" asked De Clameran, who had anxiously watched these inward struggles.—"Yes," replied Raoul; "yes; I have not your ferocious will, and I am afraid!"

"What, you, my pupil, my friend! It is not possible. Come, a little energy, one more stroke of our oars and we are in port. You are only nervous; come to dinner, and a bottle of Bur-

gundy will soon set you right." They were walking along the boulevards. De Clameran insisted upon their entering a restaurant and having dinner in a private room. Vainly did he strive, however, to chase the gloom from his companion's pale face. Raoul sat listening, with a sullen frown, to his friend's jest about "swallowing the bitter pill gracefully." Urged by Louis, he drank two bottles of wine, in hopes that intoxication would inspire him with courage to do the deed. But the drunkenness he sought came not; the wine proved false; at the bottom of the last bottle he found nothing but anger and disgust. The clock struck eight.

"The time has come," said Louis firmly. Raoul turned livid; his teeth chattered, and his limbs trembled so that he was unable to stand on his feet. "Oh, I can not do it!" he cried in an agony of terror and rage. De Clameran's eyes flashed angrily at the prospect of all his plans being ruined at the last moment. But he dared not give way to his anger, for fear of exasperating Raoul, whom he knew to be anxious for an excuse to quarrel; so he violently pulled the bell-rope. A waiter appeared. "A bottle of port," he said, "and a bottle of rum."

When the waiter returned with the bottles, Louis filled a large glass with the two liquors mixed, and handed it to Raoul. "Drink this!" he said. Raoul emptied the glass at a draft, and a faint color returned to his pale cheek. He arose, and striking the table with his fist, cried fiercely: "Come along!" But before he had walked thirty yards, the fictitious energy inspired by drink deserted him. He clung to De Clameran's arm, and was almost dragged along, trembling like a criminal on his way to the scaffold.

"If I can once get him in the house," thought Louis, who had studied Raoul and understood him; "once inside, his rôle will sustain him and carry him through, and all will be well. The cowardly baby! I would like to wring his neck!" As they walked along he said: "Now don't forget our arrangements, and be careful how you enter the house; everything depends upon that. Have you the pistol in your pocket?"—"Yes, yes! Let me alone!" It was well that De Clameran accompanied Raoul; for, when he got in sight of the door his courage gave way, and he longed to retreat. "A poor, helpless woman!" he groaned, "and an honest man who pressed my hand in friendship yesterday, to be cowardly ruined, betrayed by me! Ah, it is too base, too cowardly!"—"Come," said De Clameran in a

tone of contempt, "I thought you had more nerve. When a fellow has no more pluck than that he should remain honest!" Raoul overcame his weakness, and, silencing the clamors of his conscience, hurried to the house and pulled the bell. "Is Madame Fauvel at home?" he inquired of the servant who opened the door.

"Madame is alone in the little drawing-room," was the reply. And Raoul went upstairs.

XX

DE CLAMERAN'S injunction to Raoul was: "Be very cautious how you enter the room; your appearance must tell everything, and thus avoid impossible explanations."

The recommendation was useless. The instant that Raoul entered the room, the sight of his pale, haggard face and wild eyes made Madame Fauvel exclaim: "Raoul! What misfortune has happened to you?"

The sound of her tender, affectionate voice acted like an electric shock upon the young bandit. He shook like a leaf. But at the same time his mind seemed to change. Louis was not mistaken in his estimate of his companion's character. Raoul was on the stage, his part was to be played; his assurance returned to him; his cheating, lying nature assumed the ascendant. "This misfortune is the last I shall ever suffer, mother!" Madame Fauvel rushed toward him, and, seizing his hand, gazed searchingly into his eyes, as if to read his very soul. "What is the matter? Raoul, my dear son, do tell me what troubles you."

He gently pushed her from him. "The matter is, my mother," he said, in a voice of heart-broken despair, "that I am unworthy of you, unworthy of my noble father!" She shook her head as though to protest. "Alas!" he said, "I know and judge myself. No one can reproach me for my infamous conduct more bitterly than does my own conscience. I am not naturally wicked, but only a miserable fool. At times I am like an insane man, and am not responsible for my actions.

Ah, my dear mother, I would not be what I am if you had watched over my childhood. But brought up among strangers, with no guide but my own evil passions, nothing to restrain me, no one to advise me, no one to love me, owning nothing, not even my stolen name, I am cursed with vanity and unbounded ambition. Poor, with no one to assist me but you, I have the tastes and vices of a millionaire's son. Alas! when I found you, the evil was done. Your affection, your maternal love, the only true happiness of my life, could not save me. I, who had suffered so much, endured so many privations, even the pangs of hunger, became spoiled by this new life of luxury and pleasure which you opened before me. I rushed headlong into extravagance, as a drunkard long deprived of drink seizes and drains to the dregs the first bottle in his reach."

Madame Fauvel listened, silent and terrified, to these words of despair and remorse, which Raoul uttered with remarkable vehemence. She dared not interrupt him, but felt certain some dreadful piece of news was coming. Raoul continued in a sad, hopeless tone: "Yes; I have been a weak fool. Happiness was within my reach, and I had not the sense to stretch forth my hand and grasp it. I rejected a delicious reality to eagerly pursue a vain fantom. I, who ought to have spent my life at your feet, and daily striven to express my gratitude for your lavish kindness, have made you unhappy, destroyed your peace of mind, and, instead of being a blessing, I have been a curse ever since the first fatal day you welcomed me to your kind heart. Ah, unfeeling brute that I was, to squander upon creatures whom I despised a fortune, of which each gold piece must have cost you a tear! Too late, too late! I find that with you was happiness."

He stopped, as if overcome by the consciousness of his evil deeds, and seemed about to burst into tears. "It is never too late to repent, my son," murmured Madame Fauvel in comforting tones.—"Ah, if I only could!" cried Raoul; "but no, it is too late! Besides, can I tell how long my good resolutions will last? This is not the first time that I have condemned myself pitilessly. Stinging remorse for each new fault made me swear to lead a better life, to sin no more. What was the result of these periodical repentances? At the first temptation I forgot my remorse and good resolutions. I am weak and mean-spirited, and you are not firm enough to govern my vacillating nature. While my intentions are good, my actions are

villainous. The disproportion between my extravagant desires, and the means of gratifying them, is too great for me to endure any longer. Who knows to what fearful lengths my unfortunate disposition may lead me? However, I shall know how to do myself justice!" he finally said with a reckless laugh.

Madame Fauvel was too cruelly agitated to follow Raoul's skilful transitions. "Speak!" she cried, "explain yourself; am I not your mother? Tell me the truth; I am ready to hear the worst." He appeared to hesitate, as if afraid to crush his mother's heart by the terrible blow he was about to inflict. Then, in a voice of gloomy despair, he replied: "I am ruined!"

"Ruined!"

"Yes, ruined; and I have nothing more to expect or hope for. I am dishonored, and all through my own fault; no one is to blame but myself."—"Raoul!"

"It is the sad truth, my poor mother; but fear nothing, I shall not trail in the dust the name which you bestowed upon me. I will at least have the courage not to survive my dishonor. Come, mother, don't pity me, or distress yourself; I am one of those miserable beings fated to find no peace save in the arms of death. I came into the world with misfortune stamped upon my brow. Was not my birth a shame and disgrace to you? Did not the memory of my existence haunt you day and night, filling your soul with remorse? And now, when I am restored to you after many years' separation, do I not prove to be a bitter curse instead of a blessing?"

"Ungrateful boy! Have I ever reproached you?"—"Never! Your poor Raoul will die blessing you, and with your beloved name upon his lips."

"Die? You die, my son?"

"It must be, my dear mother; honor compels it. I am condemned by judges from whose decision no appeal can be taken—my conscience and my will." An hour ago Madame Fauvel would have sworn that Raoul had made her suffer all the torments that a woman could endure; but now she felt that all her former troubles were nothing compared with her present agony. "What, then, have you been doing, Raoul?" she gasped.

"Money was entrusted to me; I gambled, and lost it."

"Was it a very large sum?"

"No; but more than you can replace. My poor mother, have I not taken everything from you? Have you not given me your last jewel?"

"But M. de Clameran is rich. He placed his fortune at my disposal. I will order the carriage, and go to him."

"But M. de Clameran is away, and the money must be paid this evening, or I am lost. Alas! I have thought it all over and, although it is hard to die so young, still fate wills it so." He pulled the pistol from his pocket, and, with a forced smile, added: "This will settle everything." Madame Fauvel was too upset and frightened to reflect upon the horror of Raoul's behavior; and that these wild threats were a last expedient. Forgetful of the past, careless of the future, her every thought concentrated upon the present, she comprehended but one fact: that her son was about to commit suicide, and that she was powerless to prevent the fearful deed. "Oh, wait a little while, my son!" she cried. "Andre will soon return home, and I will ask him to give me— How much did you lose?"

"Thirty thousand francs."

"You shall have them to-morrow."

"But I must have the money to-night."

Madame Fauvel wrung her hands in despair. "Oh! why did you not come to me sooner, my son? Why did you not have confidence enough in me to come at once for help? This evening there is no one in the cashier's office to open the safe, otherwise—"

"The safe!" cried Raoul, "but you know where the key is kept?"

"Yes, it is in the next room."

"Well!" he exclaimed with a bold look that caused Madame Fauvel to lower her eyes and keep silent. "Give me the key, mother," he said in a tone of entreaty.

"Oh, Raoul, Raoul!"

"It is my life I am asking of you." These words decided her; she snatched up a candle, rushed into her bedroom, opened the secretary, and took out M. Fauvel's key. But when about to hand it to Raoul, her reason returned to her. "No," she stammered; "no, it is impossible." He did not insist, and seemed about to leave the room. "True," said he; "then, mother, a last kiss."—"What could you do with the key, Raoul?" asked Madame Fauvel, stopping him. "You do not know the secret word."

"No; but I can try to open it."

"You know that money is never kept in the safe over night."

"Nevertheless, I can make the attempt. If I open the safe

and find money in it, it will be a miracle, showing that Heaven has pitied my misfortunes."

"And if you are not successful, will you promise me to wait until to-morrow?"

"I swear it by my father's memory."—"Then take the key, and follow me."

Pale and trembling, Raoul and Madame Fauvel passed through the banker's study and down the narrow staircase leading to the offices and cashier's room below. Raoul walked in front, holding the light and the key of the safe. Madame Fauvel was convinced that it would be utterly impossible to open the safe, as the key was useless without the secret word, and of course Raoul could not know what that was. The only anxiety she felt was, how Raoul would bear the disappointment, how she could calm his despair. She thought that she would gain time by letting Raoul make the attempt; and then, when he found he could not open the safe, he would keep his promise and wait until the next day. "When he sees there is no chance of success," she thought, "he will wait as he promised; and then to-morrow—to-morrow—"

What she would do on the morrow she knew not, she did not even ask herself. Raoul was about to kill himself; his mother prayed to God to grant her one night; as if in this short space of time some unexpected relief would come to end her misery. They reached Prosper's office, and Raoul placed the lamp on a high stool so that it lighted the whole room. He had then recovered all his coolness, or rather that mechanical precision of movement, almost independent of will, which men accustomed to peril always find ready in time of need. Rapidly, with the dexterity of experience, he slipped the buttons on the five letters composing the name of G-i-p-s-y. His features during this short operation, expressed the most intense anxiety. He was fearful that the awful energy he had shown might after all be of no use; perhaps the safe would remain closed, perhaps the money would not be there. Prosper might have changed the word, or neglected to have the money in the safe. Madame Fauvel saw these visible apprehensions with alarm. She read in his eyes that wild hope of a man who, passionately desiring an object, ends by persuading himself that his own will suffices to overcome all obstacles. Having often been present when Prosper was preparing to leave his office, Raoul had fifty times seen him move the buttons, and lock the safe, just before the

bank closed. Indeed, having a practical turn of mind, and an eye to the future, he had even turned the key in the lock on more than one occasion. He inserted the key softly, and turned it round once, pushed it farther in, and turned it a second time; then thrust it right in with a jerk, and turned it again. His heart beat so loudly that Madame Fauvel could hear its throbs. The word had not been changed; the safe opened. Raoul and his mother simultaneously uttered a cry—she of terror, he of triumph.

"Shut it again!" exclaimed Madame Fauvel, frightened at the incomprehensible result of Raoul's attempt; "leave it alone, come away." And, half frenzied, she clung to his arm, and pulled him away so abruptly, that the key was dragged from the lock, and, slipping along the glossy varnish of the safe-door, made a deep, long scratch. But at a glance the young man had perceived four rolls of bank-notes on an upper shelf. He snatched them up with his left hand, and slipped them inside his vest. Exhausted by the effort she had made, Madame Fauvel dropped his arm, and, almost fainting with emotion, leaned against the back of a chair. "Have mercy, Raoul!" she moaned. "I implore you to put back that money, and I solemnly swear I will give you twice as much to-morrow. Oh, my son, have pity upon your unhappy mother!" He paid no attention to these words of entreaty, but carefully examined the scratch on the safe. This trace of the robbery was very visible, and alarmed him. "At least, you will not take all," said Madame Fauvel; "just keep enough to save yourself, and put back the rest."

"What good would that do? What I take will be missed just the same."

"Oh, no! not at all. I can account to Andre; I will tell him I had a pressing need for some money, and opened the safe to get it." In the mean time, Raoul had carefully closed the safe. "Come, mother, let us go back to the sitting-room. A servant might go there to look for you, and be astonished at our absence." Raoul's cruel indifference and cold calculations at such a moment filled Madame Fauvel with indignation. She thought that she had still some influence over her son—that her prayers and tears would have some effect upon his hard heart. "Let them be astonished," she cried; "let them come here and find us. Then there will be an end to all this. Andre will drive me from his house like a worthless creature, but I will

not sacrifice the innocent. Prosper will be accused of this to-morrow. De Clameran has taken from him the woman he loved, and now you would deprive him of his honor! I will not allow it."

She spoke so loudly and angrily that Raoul was alarmed. He knew that one of the office men passed the night in a room close by, and although it was still early in the evening, he might already be in bed and listening to them. "Come upstairs," he said, seizing Madame Fauvel's arm. But she clung to a table, and refused to move a step. "I have been cowardly enough to sacrifice Madeleine," she said, "but I will not ruin Prosper." Raoul had an argument in reserve, which he knew would make Madame Fauvel submit to his will. "Now, really," he said with a cynical laugh, "do you pretend that you do not know Prosper and I arranged this little affair together, and that he is waiting to share the booty?"

"It is impossible!"

"What! Do you suppose, then, that chance alone told me the word and placed the money in the safe?"

"Prosper is honest."

"Of course he is, and so am I too. The only thing is, that we both need money."

"You lie."

"No, dear mother. Madeleine dismissed Prosper, and the poor fellow has to console himself for her cruelty; and this sort of consolation is expensive." He took up the lamp, and gently but firmly led Madame Fauvel toward the staircase. She mechanically suffered him to do so, more bewildered by what she had just heard than she was at the opening of the safe door. "What!" she gasped, "can Prosper be a thief?" She began to think herself the victim of a terrible nightmare, and that, when she awoke, her mind would be relieved of this intolerable torture. She helplessly clung to Raoul's arm as he assisted her up the little narrow staircase.

"You must put the key back in the secretary," said Raoul as soon as they were in the bedroom again. But she did not seem to hear him; so he went and put it in the place from which he had seen her take it. He then led, or rather carried, Madame Fauvel into the little sitting-room, and placed her in an easy-chair. The set, expressionless look of the wretched woman's eyes, and her dazed manner, frightened Raoul, who thought that she was going out of her mind. "Come, cheer up, my

dear mother," he said in coaxing tones, as he rubbed her icy cold hands; "you have just saved my life, and have at the same time rendered an immense service to Prosper. Don't be alarmed; everything will come out right in the end. Prosper will be accused—perhaps arrested; he expects that, and is prepared for it; he will deny his culpability; and, as there is no proof against him, he will soon be set at liberty."

But these falsehoods were wasted on Madame Fauvel, who was incapable of understanding anything said to her. "Raoul," she moaned, "Raoul, my son, you have killed me." Her gentle voice, kind even in its despairing accents, touched the very bottom of Raoul's perverted heart, and once more his soul was so wrung by remorse that he felt inclined to put back the stolen money. The thought of De Clameran restrained him. Finding that Madame Fauvel still sat motionless and deathlike in her chair, and fearing that M. Fauvel or Madeleine might enter at any moment, and demand an explanation, he hastily pressed a kiss upon his mother's brow, and hurried from the house. At the restaurant, in the room where they had dined, De Clameran, tortured by anxiety, awaited his accomplice. He wondered if, at the last moment, when he was not near to sustain him, Raoul would prove a coward and retreat. The merest accident, too, is sufficient to upset the most skilful combinations. When Raoul returned, he jumped to his feet, ghastly pale, and with difficulty gasped out: "Well?"

"It is done, uncle, thanks to you; and I am now the greatest villain on the face of the earth." He unbuttoned his vest, and pulling out the four bundles of bank-notes, angrily dashed them upon the table, adding, in a tone of hate and contempt: "Now I hope you are satisfied. This is the price of the happiness, honor, and perhaps the life, of three persons." De Clameran paid no attention to these angry words. With feverish eagerness he seized the notes, and held them in his hand, as if to convince himself of the reality of success. "Now Madeleine is mine," he cried excitedly. Raoul said nothing. This exhibition of joy, after the scene in which he had just been an actor, disgusted and humiliated him. Louis misinterpreted his silence, and asked, gaily: "Did you have much difficulty?"—"I forbid you ever to allude to this evening's work," cried Raoul fiercely. "Do you hear me? I wish to forget it." De Clameran shrugged his shoulders at this outburst of anger, and said, in a bantering tone: "Just as you please, my handsome nephew; forget it if

you like. I rather think, though, you will not refuse to accept these three hundred and fifty thousand francs as a slight memento. Take them—they are yours."

This generosity seemed neither to surprise nor satisfy Raoul. "According to our agreement," he said sullenly, "I was to have much more than this."

"Of course; this is only on account."

"And when am I to have the rest, if you please?"

"The day I marry Madeleine, and not before, my boy. You are too valuable an assistant to lose at present; and you know that, though I don't mistrust you, I am not altogether sure of your sincere affection for me." Raoul reflected that to commit a crime, and not profit by it, would be the height of absurdity. He had returned with the intention of breaking off all connection with De Clameran; but he now determined that he would not abandon his accomplice until there was nothing more to get out of him. "Very well," he said, "I accept this on account; but remember, I will never do another piece of work like this of to-night."

De Clameran burst into a loud laugh, and replied: "That is sensible; now that you are rich, you can afford to be honest. Set your conscience at rest, for I promise you I will require nothing more of you save a few trifling services. You can retire behind the scenes now, while I appear upon the stage."

XXI

FOR more than an hour after Raoul's departure, Madame Fauvel remained in a state of torpor bordering upon unconsciousness. Gradually, however, she recovered her senses sufficiently to comprehend the horrors of her present situation; and, with the faculty of thought, that of suffering returned. The dreadful scene in which she had taken part was still before her affrighted vision; all the attending circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now struck her forcibly. She saw that she had been the dupe of a shameful conspiracy; that Raoul had tortured her with cold-blooded cruelty, had taken advantage of

her tenderness, and played with her sufferings. But had Prosper anything to do with the robbery? This Madame Fauvel had no way of finding out. Ah, Raoul knew how the blow would strike when he accused his friend. He knew that she would end by believing in the cashier's complicity. Knowing that Madeleine's lover was leading a life of extravagance and dissipation, she thought it very likely he had, from sheer desperation, resorted to this bold step to pay his debts; her blind affection, moreover, made her anxious to attribute the first idea of crime to any one, rather than to her son. She had heard that Prosper was supporting one of those worthless creatures whose extravagance impoverishes men, and whose evil influence perverts their natures. When a young man is thus degraded, will he stop at any sin or crime? Alas! Madame Fauvel knew, from her own sad experience, to what depths even one fault can lead. Although she believed Prosper guilty, she did not blame him, but considered herself responsible for his sins. Was she not the cause that he no longer frequented the home he had begun to look upon as his own? Had she not destroyed his hopes of happiness, and driven him to a life of dissipation, wherein perhaps he sought forgetfulness? She was undecided whether to confide in Madeleine, or bury the secret in her own breast. Fatally inspired, she decided to keep silent.

When the young girl returned home at eleven o'clock, Madame Fauvel not only was silent as to what had occurred, but even succeeded in so concealing all traces of her agitation, that she escaped any questions from her niece. Her calmness never left her when M. Fauvel and Lucien returned, although she was in terror lest her husband should go down to the cashier's room to examine the books. It was not his habit to open the safe at night, but he sometimes did so. As fate would have it, the banker, as soon as he entered the room, began to speak of Prosper, saying how distressing it was that so interesting a young man should be thus throwing himself away, and wondering what could have happened to make him suddenly cease his visits at the house, and resort to bad company. If M. Fauvel had looked at the faces of his wife and niece while he harshly blamed the cashier, he would have been puzzled at their strange expression. All night long Madame Fauvel suffered the most intolerable agony. "In six hours," she would say to herself, "in three hours, in one hour, all will be discovered; and then what will happen?"

When daybreak came she heard the servants moving about the house. Then the offices were opened, and the noise made by the arriving clerks reached her. She attempted to get up, but felt so ill and weak that she sank back upon her pillow; and lying there, trembling like a leaf, bathed in cold perspiration, she awaited the discovery of the robbery. She was leaning over the side of the bed, straining her ear to catch the least sound, when Madeleine, who had shortly left her, rushed back into the room. The poor girl's white face and wild eyes told Madame Fauvel that the crime was discovered.

"Do you know what has happened, aunt?" cried Madeleine in a shrill, horrified tone. "Prosper is accused of robbery, and the commissary of police has come to take him to prison!" A groan was Madame Fauvel's only answer. "Raoul or the marquis is at the bottom of this," continued Madeleine excitedly.

"How can they be concerned in it?"

"I can't tell yet; but I only know that Prosper is innocent. I have just seen him, spoken to him. He would never have looked me in the face had he been guilty." Madame Fauvel opened her lips to confess all: fear kept her silent. "What can these wretches want?" asked Madeleine; "what new sacrifice do they demand? Dishonor Prosper! They had far better have killed him—I would have said nothing."

M. Fauvel's entrance into the room interrupted Madeleine. The banker was so enraged that he could scarcely speak. "The worthless scoundrel!" he cried; "to think of his daring to accuse me! to insinuate that I robbed my own safe! And that Marquis de Clameran, who seems to doubt my integrity." Then, without noticing the effect of his words upon the two women, he proceeded to relate all that had occurred. "I was afraid of something of this sort last night," he said in conclusion; "this is the result of leading such a life as his has been lately."

Throughout the day Madeleine's devotion to her aunt was severely tried. The generous girl saw disgrace heaped upon the man she loved. She had perfect faith in his innocence; she felt sure she knew who had laid the trap to ruin him, and yet she did not say a word in his defense. Fearing that Madeleine would suspect her of complicity in the theft if she remained in bed and betrayed so much agitation, Madame Fauvel rose and dressed for breakfast. It was a dreary meal. No one tasted a morsel. The servants moved about on tiptoe, as silently as if a death had occurred in the family. About two o'clock a servant

came to M. Fauvel's study, and said that the Marquis de Clameran desired to see him. "What!" cried the banker, "does he dare—" Then, after a moment's reflection, he added: "Ask him to walk up."

The very name of De Clameran sufficed to arouse all M. Fauvel's slumbering wrath. The victim of a robbery, finding his safe empty at the moment that he was called upon to make a heavy payment, he had been constrained to curb his anger and resentment; but now he determined to have his revenge upon his insolent visitor. But the marquis declined to come upstairs. The messenger returned with the answer that the gentleman had a particular reason for seeing M. Fauvel in the office below, where the clerks were. "What does this fresh impertinence mean?" cried the banker, as he angrily jumped up and hastened downstairs.

M. de Clameran was standing in the middle of the office adjoining the cashier's room; M. Fauvel walked up to him, and roughly said: "What do you want now, sir? You have been paid your money, and I have your receipt." To the surprise of all the clerks, and the banker himself, the marquis seemed not in the least offended at this rude greeting, but answered in a deferential though not at all humble manner: "You are hard upon me, sir, but I deserve it, and that is why I am here. A gentleman always acknowledges when he is in the wrong; in this instance I am the offender; and I flatter myself that my past will permit me to say so without being accused of cowardice or lack of self-respect. If I desire to see you here instead of in your study, it was because, having been rude to you in the presence of your clerks, I wished them to be witnesses of my apology for the same."

De Clameran's speech was so different from his usual overbearing, haughty conduct, that the surprised banker could only stammer: "I must say that I was hurt by your doubts, your insinuations—"

"This morning," continued the marquis, "I was irritated, and thoughtlessly gave way to my temper. Although I am gray-headed, my disposition is as excitable as that of a fiery young man of twenty. My words, believe me, did not represent my real thoughts, and I regret them deeply." M. Fauvel being himself a kind-hearted though quick-tempered man, could understand De Clameran's feelings; and, knowing that his own high reputation for scrupulous honesty could not be affected

by any hasty language, he at once calmed down before so frank an apology. Holding out his hand to De Clameran, he said: "Let us forget what happened, sir." They conversed in a friendly manner for some minutes; and De Clameran, after explaining why he had such pressing need of the money at that particular hour of the morning, turned to leave, saying that he would do himself the honor of calling upon Madame Fauvel. "That is, if a visit just now would not be considered intrusive," he said with a shade of hesitation. "Perhaps after the trouble of this morning, she does not wish to be disturbed." "Oh, no!" said the banker; "I think a visit would cheer her up. I am obliged to go out on account of this unfortunate affair."

Madame Fauvel was in the same room where Raoul had threatened to kill himself the night before; she looked very ill as she lay on a sofa, with Madeleine seated beside her. When M. de Clameran was announced, they both started up as if a fantom had appeared before them. Although Louis had been gay and smiling when he parted from M. Fauvel downstairs, he now wore a melancholy aspect, as he gravely bowed, and refused to seat himself in the chair which Madame Fauvel motioned him to take. "You will excuse me, ladies," he began, "for intruding upon your affliction; but I have a duty to fulfill."

The two women were silent; they seemed to be waiting for him to explain. He therefore added in an undertone: "I know all."

By an imploring gesture, Madame Fauvel tried to stop him. She saw that he was about to reveal her secret to Madeleine. But Louis would not see this gesture; he turned his whole attention to Madeleine, who haughtily said: "Explain yourself, sir."

"Only an hour ago," he replied, "I discovered that Raoul last night forced from his mother the key of the safe, and stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Madeleine crimsoned with shame and indignation; she leaned over the sofa, and seizing her aunt by the wrists shook her violently. "Is it true?" she asked in a hollow voice; "is it true?"

"Alas! alas!" groaned Madame Fauvel, utterly crushed.

"You have allowed Prosper to be accused," cried the young girl; "you have suffered him to be arrested and disgraced for life."—"Forgive me," murmured her aunt. "Raoul was about

to kill himself; I was so frightened! Then you know—Prosper was to share the money with him."—"Oh!" exclaimed Madeleine indignantly; "you were told that, and you believed it!" De Clameran interrupted them. "Unfortunately," he said in a sad tone, "what your aunt says of M. Bertomy is the truth."

"Your proofs, sir, where are your proofs?"

"Raoul's confession."

"Raoul is a scoundrel!"

"That is only too true; but how did he find out the word, if M. Bertomy did not reveal it? And who left the money in the safe but M. Bertomy?" These arguments had no effect upon Madeleine. "And now tell me," she said scornfully, "what became of the money?" There was no mistaking the significance of these words; they meant: "You are the instigator of the robbery, and of course the receiver as well." This harsh accusation from a girl whom he so passionately loved, when, grasping bandit as he was, he risked for her sake all the money gained by his crimes, so cruelly hurt De Clameran that he turned livid. But he had prepared and studied his part too well to be at all discouraged. "A day will come, mademoiselle," he said, "when you will deeply regret having treated me so cruelly. I understand your insinuation; oh! you need not attempt to deny it—"

"I have no idea of denying anything, sir."

"Madeleine!" remonstrated Madame Fauvel, who trembled at the rising anger of the man who held her fate in his hands, "Madeleine, have mercy!"

"Mademoiselle is pitiless," said De Clameran sadly; "she cruelly punishes an honorable man whose only fault is having obeyed his brother's dying injunctions. And I am here now because I believe in the joint responsibility of all the members of a family." Here he slowly drew from his pocket several bundles of bank-notes, and laid them on the mantelpiece. "Raoul stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs," he said: "I return the same amount. It is more than half my fortune. Willingly would I give the rest to insure this being his last crime."

Too inexperienced to penetrate De Clameran's bold, and yet simple plan, Madeleine was dumb with astonishment; all her calculations were upset. Madame Fauvel, on the contrary, accepted this restitution as salvation sent from heaven. "Oh,

thanks, sir, thanks!" she cried, gratefully clasping De Clameran's hand in hers; "you are goodness itself!"

Louis's eyes lit up with pleasure. But he rejoiced too soon. A minute's reflection brought back all of Madeleine's distrust. She thought this generosity unnatural in a man whom she considered incapable of a noble sentiment, and at once concluded that it must conceal some snare beneath. "What are we to do with this money?" she demanded.—"Restore it to M. Fauvel, mademoiselle."

"We restore it, sir, and how? Restoring the money is denouncing Raoul, and ruining my aunt. Take back your money, sir." De Clameran was too shrewd to insist; he took up the money and seemed about to leave. "I comprehend your refusal, mademoiselle, and must find another way of accomplishing my wish. But, before retiring, let me say that your injustice pains me deeply. After the promise you made to me, I had reason to hope for a kinder welcome."

"I will keep my promise, sir, but not until you have furnished security."

"Security! What security? Pray explain yourself."

"Something to protect my aunt against Raoul after my—marriage. What is my dowry to a man who squanders a hundred thousand francs in four months? We are making a bargain; I give you my hand in exchange for my aunt's life and honor, and of course you must give me some security for the performance of your promise."

"Oh! I will give you ample securities," exclaimed De Clameran, "such as will quiet all your suspicious doubts of my good faith. Alas! you will not believe in my devotion; what shall I do to convince you of its sincerity? Shall I try to save M. Bertomy?"—"Thanks for the offer, sir," replied Madeleine disdainfully; "if Prosper is guilty, let him be punished by the law; if he is innocent, God will protect him."

Madeleine and her aunt rose from their seats to signify that the interview was over. De Clameran bowed, and left the room. "What pride! What determination! The idea of her demanding security of me!" he said to himself as he slowly walked away. "But the proud girl shall be humbled yet. She is so beautiful! and, if I did not so madly love her—well! so much the worse for Raoul!"

Never had De Clameran been so incensed. Madeleine's quiet determination and forethought, which he had not anticipated,

had upset his well-laid plan. He was disconcerted and at a loss how to proceed. He knew that it would be useless to attempt deceiving a girl of Madeleine's character a second time; he saw that though she had not penetrated his motives, she was on the defensive, and prepared for any new surprise. Moreover, she would prevent Madame Fauvel from being frightened and forced into submission any longer. At the very moment when Louis thought he had won easily, he met with an adversary. The whole thing would have to be gone over again. Although Madeleine had resigned herself to sacrifice, it was evident that she had no idea of doing so blindly, and would not hazard her aunt's and her own happiness upon the uncertainty of eventual promises. How could he furnish the securities she demanded? What measures could he take to prevent Raoul from importuning his mother in the future. Once De Clameran married, and Raoul become rich, there would be no further reason for disquieting Madame Fauvel. But how prove this to Madeleine? The knowledge of all the circumstances of this shameful and criminal intrigue would have reassured her upon this point; but then it would never do to inform her of these details, especially before the marriage. What securities then could he give? But De Clameran was not one of those hesitating men who take weeks to consider a difficulty. When he could not untie a knot, he would cut it. Raoul was a stumbling-block to his wishes, and he swore to rid himself of his troublesome accomplice somehow or other. It was not, however, an easy matter to dispose of so cunning a knave as Raoul. But this consideration could not stop De Clameran. The more certain he was of Madeleine's contempt and dislike, the more determined he was to marry her. But he had sense enough to see that he might ruin his prospects by undue haste, and that the safest course would be to await the result of the accusation against Prosper before moving further in the matter.

He waited in anxious expectation of a summons from Madame Fauvel. But he was again mistaken. On calmly thinking over the two accomplices' last acts, Madeleine came to the conclusion that they would remain quiet for a while; she knew resistance could have no worse results than would cowardly submission, and therefore assumed the entire responsibility of managing the affair so as to keep at bay both Raoul and De Clameran. She knew that Madame Fauvel would be anxious

to accept any terms of peace, but determined to use all her influence to prevent her doing this, and to force upon her the necessity of maintaining a firmer and more dignified attitude. This accounted for the silence of the two women, who were quietly waiting for their adversaries to renew hostilities. They even succeeded in concealing their anxiety beneath assumed indifference; never asking any questions about the robbery, or those who were in any way connected with it. M. Fauvel brought them an account of Prosper's examination, the many charges brought against him, his obstinate denial of having stolen the money; and finally, how, after great perplexity and close study of the case by the investigating magistrate, the cashier had been discharged for want of sufficient proof against him. Since De Clameran's offer to replace the money, Madame Fauvel had not doubted Prosper's guilt. She said nothing, but inwardly accused him of having seduced her son from the path of virtue, and enticed him into crime. Madeleine, on the contrary, had perfect faith in Prosper's innocence. She was so sure of it that, learning that he was about to be set at liberty, she ventured to ask her uncle, under pretext of some charitable object, to give her ten thousand francs, which she sent to the unfortunate victim of circumstantial evidence who, from all that she had heard, was probably in great need of assistance. In the letter—cut from her prayer-book to avoid detection by writing—accompanying the money, she advised Prosper to leave France, because she knew that it would be impossible for a man of his proud nature to remain on the scene of his disgrace. Besides, Madeleine, at that time, feeling that she would be obliged sooner or later to marry De Clameran, was anxious to have the man she loved far, far away from her. And yet, on the day that this anonymous present was sent, in opposition to the wishes of Madame Fauvel, the two poor women were fearfully entangled in pecuniary difficulties. The tradesmen, whose money had been squandered by Raoul, refused to give credit any longer, and insisted upon their bills being paid at once; saying they could not understand how a man of M. Fauvel's wealth and position could keep them waiting for such insignificant amounts. One was owed two thousand, another one thousand, and a third only five hundred francs. The butcher, the grocer, and the wine-merchant would call together, and Madame Fauvel had the greatest difficulty in prevailing upon them to accept something on account. Some of

them threatened to apply to the banker. Madame Fauvel's indebtedness amounted to almost fifteen thousand francs. Madeleine and her aunt had declined all invitations during the winter, to avoid spending money on dress. But at last they were obliged to appear in public. M. Fauvel's most intimate friends, the Messrs. Jandidier, were about to give a splendid ball, and, as fate would have it, a fancy ball, which would require the purchasing of costumes. Where was the money to come from? They had been owing a large bill to their dressmaker for over a year. Would she consent to furnish them with any more dresses on credit? Madeleine's new maid, Palmyre Chocareille, extricated them from this difficulty. This girl, who seemed to have suffered all the minor ills of life—which, after all, were the hardest to bear—seemed to have divined her mistress's anxiety. At any rate, she voluntarily informed Madeleine that a friend of hers, a first-class dressmaker, had just set up for herself, and would be glad to furnish materials and make the dresses on credit, for the sake of obtaining the patronage of Madame Fauvel and her niece, which would at once bring her plenty of fashionable customers. But this was not all. Neither of them could go to the ball without jewelry; and every jewel they owned had been taken by Raoul and pawned, and he had the tickets. After thinking the matter over, Madeleine decided to ask Raoul to devote some of the stolen money to redeeming the jewels he had forced from his mother. She informed her aunt of her plan, saying: "Make an appointment with Raoul: he will not dare to refuse you; and I will go in your stead." And, two days after, the courageous girl took a cab, and, regardless of the inclement weather, went to Vesinet. She had no idea, then, that M. Verduret and Prosper were following close behind her, and that they witnessed her interview from the top of a ladder. Her bold step, however, was fruitless. Raoul swore than he had shared with Prosper; that his own half was spent, and that he was quite without money. He even refused to give up the pawn-tickets; and Madeleine had to insist most energetically before she could induce him to give up four or five trifling articles that were absolutely indispensable. De Clameran had ordered him to refuse, because he hoped that in their distress they would apply to him for help. Raoul had obeyed, but only after a violent altercation witnessed by De Clameran's new valet, Joseph Dubois. The accomplices were at that time on very bad terms together. The marquis

was seeking a safe means of getting rid of Raoul; and the young scamp had a sort of presentiment of his uncle's friendly intentions. Nothing but the certainty of impending danger could reconcile them; and this was revealed to them at the Jandidier ball. Who was the mysterious mountebank that had indulged in such transparent allusions to Madame Fauvel's private troubles, and then said with threatening significance to Louis: "I was your brother Gaston's friend!"

Who he was, where he came from, they could not imagine; but they clearly saw that he was a dangerous enemy, and forthwith attempted to assassinate him upon his leaving the ball. Having followed him and then having lost him, they became alarmed. "We can not be too guarded in our conduct," whispered De Clameran; "we shall know only too soon who he is." Once more Raoul tried to induce him to give up his project of marrying Madeleine. "Never!" he exclaimed: "I will marry her or perish!"

They thought that, now they were warned, the danger of their being caught was lessened. But they did not know the sort of man who was on their track.

XXII

SUCH are the facts that, with an almost incredible talent for investigation, had been collected and prepared by M. Verduret, the stout man with the jovial face who had taken Prosper under his protection. Reaching Paris at nine o'clock at night, not by the Lyons train as he had announced, but by the Orleans one, M. Verduret had hastened to the Hotel of the Grand Archangel, where he had found the cashier impatiently expecting him.

"You are about to hear something extraordinary," he had said to Prosper, "and you will see how far back one has to seek into the past for the primary causes of a crime. All things are linked together and dependent upon each other in this world of ours. If Gaston de Clameran had not entered a little cafe at Tarascon to play a game of billiards twenty

years ago, your safe would not have been robbed three weeks back. Valentine de la Verberie is punished in 1866 for the murders committed for her sake in 1840. Nothing is ever lost or forgotten. Listen."

And he forthwith related all that he had discovered, referring as he went along to his notes and the voluminous manuscript which he had prepared. During the entire week, M. Verduret had not perhaps taken in all twenty-four hours' rest, but he bore no great traces of fatigue. His iron muscles braved any amount of labor, and his elastic nature was too well tempered to give way beneath such pressure. While any other man would have sunk exhausted in a chair, he stood up and described, with the enthusiasm and captivating animation peculiar to him, the minutest details and intricacies of the plot that he had devoted his whole energy to unraveling; personating, so to say, every character he brought upon the scene, so that his listener was bewildered and dazzled by his brilliant acting. As Prosper listened to this narrative of events happening twenty years back, the secret conversations as minutely related as if overheard the moment they took place, it sounded to him more like a romance than a plain statement of facts. All these ingenious explanations might be logical, but what foundation did they possess? Might they not be the dream of an excited imagination?

M. Verduret did not finish his report until four o'clock in the morning; then he exclaimed triumphantly: "And now they are on their guard; they are wary rascals too; but I can laugh at their efforts, for I have them safe. Before a week is over, Prosper, your innocence will be recognized by every one. I promised your father this."—"Is it possible?" murmured Prosper in a dazed way; "is it possible?"

"What?"

"All this you have just told me." M. Verduret bounded like a man little accustomed to have the accuracy of his information doubted. "Is it possible, indeed?" he cried; "but it is truth itself, truth founded on fact and exposed in all its impressiveness!"

"But how can such rascalities take place in Paris, in the very midst of us, without—"

"Ah!" interrupted the stout man, "you are young, my friend! Crimes worse than this happen, and you know nothing of them. You think the horrors of the assize court are the only ones.

Pooh! You only read in the 'Gazette des Tribunaux' of the bloody melodramas of life, where the actors, low-born villains, are as cowardly as the knife, or as stupid as the poison they use. It is at the family fireside, often under shelter of the law itself, that the real tragedies of life are acted; in these days traitors wear gloves, scoundrels cloak themselves in public esteem, and their victims die broken-hearted, but smiling to the last. What I have just related to you is almost an every-day occurrence; and yet you profess astonishment."

"I can't help wondering how you discovered all this tissue of crime."

"Ah, that is the point!" said M. Verduret, with a self-satisfied smile. "When I undertake a task, I devote my whole attention to it. Now make a note of this: When a man of ordinary intelligence concentrates his thoughts and energies upon the attainment of an object, he is almost always certain to ultimately obtain success. Besides that, I have my own means of working up a case."

"Still I don't see what grounds you had to go upon."

"To be sure, one needs some light to guide one in a dark affair like this. But the fire in De Clameran's eye at the mention of Gaston's name ignited my lantern. From that moment I walked straight to the solution of the mystery, as to a beacon." Prosper's eager, questioning looks showed that he would like to know the secret of his protector's wonderful penetration, and at the same time be more thoroughly convinced that what he had heard was all true—that his innocence would be clearly proved.

"Now confess," cried M. Verduret, "you would give something to know how I discovered the truth."

"I certainly would, for to me it seems marvelous!"

M. Verduret enjoyed Prosper's bewilderment. To be sure, he was neither a good judge nor a distinguished amateur; but sincere admiration is always flattering, no matter whence it comes.

"Well," he replied, "I will explain my system. There is nothing marvelous about it, as you will soon see. We worked together to find the solution of the problem, so you know my reason for suspecting De Clameran as the prime mover in the robbery. As soon as I had arrived at this conclusion my task was easy. You want to know what I did? I placed trustworthy people to watch the parties in whom I was most inter-

ested. Joseph Dubois took charge of De Clameran, and Nina Gipsy never lost sight of Madame Fauvel and her niece."

"I know, and I can not comprehend how Nina ever consented to this service."—"That is my secret," replied M. Verduret. "Having the assistance of good eyes and quick ears on the spot, I went to Beaucaire to inquire into the past, so as to link it with what I was sure to learn of the present. The next day I was at Clameran; and the first step I took was to find the son of Jean, the old valet. An honest fellow he is, too; open and simple as nature herself; and he at once guessed that I wanted to purchase some madder."—"Madder?" said Prosper with a puzzled look.—"Of course I wanted to buy his madder. He had madder for sale, that was evident; so we began to bargain about the price. The debate lasted almost all day, during which time we drank a dozen bottles of wine. About supper-time, Jean, the younger, was as drunk as a barrel, and I had purchased nine hundred francs' worth of madder which your father will sell for me." Prosper looked so astonished that M. Verduret laughed heartily. "I risked nine hundred francs," he continued, "but thread by thread I gathered the whole history of the De Clamerans, Gaston's love affair, his flight, and the stumbling of the horse ridden by Louis. I found also that about a year ago Louis returned and sold the chateau to a man named Fougeroux, whose wife, Mihonne, had a secret interview with Louis the day of the purchase. I went to see Mihonne. Poor woman! her rascally husband has pounded nearly all the sense out of her; she is almost idiotic. I convinced her that I came from some De Clameran or other, and she at once related to me everything she knew." The apparent simplicity of this mode of investigation confounded Prosper. "From that time," continued M. Verduret, "the skein began to disentangle; I held the principal thread. I now set about finding out what had become of Gaston. Lafourcade, who is a friend of your father, informed me that he had bought an iron foundry at Oloron, had settled there, and died soon after."

"You are certainly indefatigable!" said Prosper.

"No, but I always strike when the iron is hot. At Oloron I met Manuel, who had gone there to make a little visit before returning to Spain. From him I obtained a complete history of Gaston's life, and all the particulars of his death. Manuel also told me of Louis's visit; and an innkeeper described a

young workman who was there at the same time, whom I at once recognized as Raoul."—"But how did you know of all the conversations between the villains?" asked Prosper.

"You evidently think I have been drawing upon my imagination. You will soon think the contrary. While I was at work at Oloron, my assistants here did not sit with their hands in their pockets. Mutually distrustful, De Clameran and Raoul preserved all the letters they received from each other. Joseph Dubois copied most of them, and had the more important ones photographed, and forwarded the copies to me. Nina spent her time listening at all the doors, and sent me a faithful report of everything she heard. Finally, I have at the Fauvels' another means of investigation, which I will reveal to you later."

—"I understand it now," murmured Prosper.

"And what have you been doing during my absence, my young friend?" asked M. Verduret. At this question Prosper turned crimson. But he knew that it would never do to keep silent about his imprudent step. "Alas!" he stammered, "I read in a newspaper that De Clameran was about to marry Madeleine; and I acted like a fool."—"What did you do?" inquired M. Verduret anxiously.—"I sent M. Fauvel an anonymous letter, in which I insinuated that his wife was in love with Raoul—"

M. Verduret here brought his clenched fist down upon the little table near which he sat, and broke it. "Wretched man!" he cried, "you have probably ruined everything." A great change came over him. His usually jovial face assumed a menacing expression. He rose from his seat, and strode up and down the room, oblivious of the lodgers on the floor below. "But you must be a baby," added he to the dismayed Prosper, "an idiot, or, worse than that, a fool."

"Sir!"

"Here you are drowning; a brave man springs into the water after you, and just as he is on the point of saving you, you cling to his feet to prevent him swimming! What did I tell you to do?"

"To keep quiet, and not go out."

"Well!"

The consciousness of having done a foolish thing made Prosper as frightened as a schoolboy, accused by his teacher of playing truant. "It was night, sir," he said, "and, having a violent headache, I took a walk along the quays. I thought

there would be no harm in my entering a cafe; I took up a paper and read the dreadful announcement."

"Was it not settled that you should have perfect confidence in me?"

"You were not here, sir; this announcement had quite upset me; you were far away, and might have been surprised by an unexpected—"

"Nothing is unexpected except to a fool!" declared M. Verduret peremptorily. "To write an anonymous letter! Do you know to what you expose me? You are the cause of my perhaps breaking a sacred promise made to one of the few persons whom I highly esteem among my fellow beings. I shall be looked upon as a cheat, a dastard, I, who—" He stopped abruptly, as if afraid of saying too much, and it was only after some minutes that, having become calm again, he resumed: "It is no use crying over what is done. We must try and get out of the mess somehow. When and where did you post this letter?"

"Last night, in the Rue du Cardinal Lemoine. It hardly reached the bottom of the box before I regretted having written it."

"Your regrets should have come sooner. What time was it?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Then your sweet little letter must have reached M. Fauvel this morning with his other correspondence; probably he was alone in his study when he opened and read it."

"It is not probable, it is certain."

"Can you recall the exact words of your letter? Stop and think, for it is very important that I should know."—"Oh, it is unnecessary for me to reflect. I remember the letter as if I had just written it." And he repeated almost verbatim what he had written.

M. Verduret listened most attentively with a perplexed frown upon his face. "That is a formidable anonymous letter," he murmured, "to come from a person who does not deal in such things. It insinuates everything without specifying a single thing; it is vague, jeering, and treacherous. Repeat it to me." Prosper obeyed, and his second version did not vary from the first in a single word. "Nothing could be more alarming than that allusion to the cashier," said the stout man, repeating the words after Prosper. "The question, 'Is it also he who stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds?' is simply horrible! What could

be more exasperating than the sarcastic advice, 'In your place, I would not have any public scandal, but would watch my wife'? The effect of your letter must have been terrible," he added thoughtfully, as he stood with folded arms in front of Prosper. "M. Fauvel is quick-tempered, is he not?"

"He has a very violent temper."

"Then the mischief is perhaps not irreparable."

"What! do you suppose—?"—"I think that an impulsive man is afraid of himself, and seldom carries out his first intentions. That is our only chance. If, upon the receipt of your bomb-shell, M. Fauvel, unable to restrain himself, rushed into his wife's room, exclaiming: 'Where are your diamonds?' our plans are done for. I know Madame Fauvel, she will confess all."

"Why would this be so disastrous?"

"Because the moment Madame Fauvel opens her lips to her husband our birds will take flight." Prosper had never thought of this eventuality. "Then, again," continued M. Verduret, "it would deeply distress another person."

"Any one whom I know?"

"Yes, my friend, and very well too. I should certainly be vexed to the last degree if these two rascals escape without my being thoroughly informed about them."

"It seems to me that you know sufficient."

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders, and asked: "Did you not perceive any gaps in my narrative?"

"Not one."

"That is because you don't know how to listen. In the first place, did Louis de Clameran poison his brother or not?"

"Yes; I am sure of it, from what you tell me."

"There you are! You are much more certain, young man, than I am. Your opinion is mine; but what decisive proof have we? None. I skilfully questioned Dr. C——. He has not the shadow of a suspicion; and Dr. C—— is no quack; he is a learned and observing man of high standing. What poisons produce the effects described? I know of none; and yet I have studied all sorts of poisons, from the digitalis used by La Pommeraye to Madame Sauvresy's aconite."

"The death took place so opportunely—"

"That anybody would suspect foul play. That is true; but chance is sometimes a wonderful accomplice in crime. In the second place, I know nothing of Raoul's antecedents."—"Is information on that point necessary?"

"Indispensable, my friend; but we will soon know something. I have sent one of my men—excuse me, I mean one of my friends—who is very expert, M. Palot; and he writes that he is on the track. I am interested in the history of this sentimental, skeptical young rascal. I have an idea that, had he not known De Clameran, he might have been a brave, honest sort of youth. Prosper was no longer listening. M. Verduret's words had inspired him with confidence. Already he saw the guilty men arraigned before the bar of justice; and enjoyed, in anticipation, this assize-court drama, where he would be publicly righted, after having been so openly dishonored. More than that, he now understood Madeleine, her strange conduct at the dressmaker's was explained, and he knew that she had never ceased to love him. This certainty of future happiness restored all the self-possession that had deserted him the day he found the safe robbed. For the first time he was astonished at the peculiarity of his situation. Prosper had at first only been surprised at the protection of M. Verduret and the extent of his investigations; now he asked himself, what could have been his friend's motives for acting thus? In a word, what price did he expect for this sacrifice of time and labor? His anxiety was so great on this point that he suddenly exclaimed: "You have no longer the right, sir, to preserve your incognito with me. When you have saved the honor and life of a man, you should at least let him know whom he has to thank."

"Oh!" said M. Verduret smilingly; "you are not out of the mess yet. You are not married either; so you must, for a few days longer, have patience and faith." The clock struck six. "Good heavens!" he added. "Can it be six o'clock? I did hope to have a good night's rest, but this is no time for sleeping." He went to the landing, and leaning over the balusters, called: "Madame Alexandre! I say, Madame Alexandre!"

The hostess of the Grand Archangel, the portly wife of Fanferlot, "the squirrel," had evidently not been to bed. This fact struck Prosper. She appeared, obsequious, smiling, and eager to please. "What do you require, gentlemen?" she inquired.—"You can send me your—Joseph Dubois, and also Palmyre, as soon as possible. Have them sent for at once, and let me know when they arrive. I will take a little rest in the mean time."

As soon as Madame Alexandre left the room, the stout man

unceremoniously threw himself on the bed. "You have no objection, I suppose," he said to Prosper. In five minutes he was fast asleep; and Prosper, more perplexed than ever, seated himself in an easy-chair and wondered who this strange man could be. About nine o'clock some one tapped timidly on the door. Slight as the noise was, it aroused M. Verduret, who sprang up and called out: "Who is there?" But Prosper had already opened the door. Joseph Dubois, the Marquis de Clameran's valet, entered. M. Verduret's assistant was breathless from running; and his little eyes were more restless than ever.

"Well, master, I am glad to see you once more," he cried. "Now you can tell me what to do; I have been perfectly lost during your absence, and have felt like a puppet with a broken string."—"What! you allow yourself to be disconcerted like that?"

"Bless me! I think I had cause for alarm when I could not find you anywhere. Yesterday afternoon I sent you three telegrams, to the addresses you gave me, at Lyons, Beaucaire, and Oloron, and received no answer. I was almost going crazy when your message reached me just now."

"Things are getting warm, then."—"Warm! They are burning! The place is too hot to hold me any longer."

While speaking, M. Verduret occupied himself in repairing his toilet, which had become disarranged during his sleep. When he had finished, he threw himself in an easy-chair, and said to Joseph Dubois, who remained respectfully standing, cap in hand, like a soldier, awaiting orders: "Explain yourself, my lad, and quickly, if you please; no long phrases."—"It is just this, sir. I don't know what your plans are, or what means you have of carrying them out; but you must wind up this affair and strike your final blow very quickly."

"That is your opinion, Master Joseph!"

"Yes, master, because if you wait any longer, good-by to our covey; you will only find an empty cage, and the birds flown. You smile? Yes, I know you are clever, and can accomplish anything; but they are cunning blades, and as slippery as eels. They know, too, that they are watched."—"The devil they do!" cried M. Verduret. "Some one must have blundered."—"Oh! nobody has done anything wrong," replied Joseph. "You know that they suspected something long ago. They gave you a proof of it the night of the fancy-dress ball; I mean that ugly cut on your arm. Ever since they have always slept with one

eye open. They were feeling easier, however, when all of a sudden, yesterday, they began to smell a rat!"

"Was that why you sent me those telegrams?"

"Of course. Now listen: yesterday morning when my master got up, about ten o'clock, he took it into his head to arrange the papers in his desk; which, by the way, has a disgusting lock which has given me a great deal of trouble. Meanwhile, I pretended to be making up the fire, so as to remain in the room to watch him. That man has a Yankee's eye! At the first glance he saw, or rather divined, that his papers had been meddled with; he turned as white as a sheet, and swore an oath, such an oath!"—"Never mind the oath; go on."

"Well, how he discovered his letters had been touched I can't imagine. You know how careful I am. I had put everything back in its place just as I found it. To make sure he was not mistaken, the marquis picks up each paper, one at a time, turns it over, and smells it. I was just longing to offer him a microscope, when all of a sudden he sprang up, and, kicking his chair to the other end of the room, flew at me in a fury. 'Somebody has been at my papers,' he shrieked; 'this letter has been photographed!' B-r-r-r! I am not a coward, but I can tell you that my heart stood perfectly still; I saw myself dead, cut into mince-meat; and I even said to myself, 'Fanfer—excuse me—Dubois, my friend, you are done for.'"

M. Verduret was buried in thought, and paid no attention to the worthy Joseph's analysis of his personal sensations. "What happened next?" he asked after a few minutes.—"Why, I was needlessly frightened after all. The rascal did not dare to touch me. To be sure, I had taken the precaution to get out of his reach; we talked with a large table between us. While wondering what could have enabled him to discover the secret, I defended myself with virtuous indignation. I said: 'It can not be; Monsieur le Marquis is mistaken. Who would dare touch his papers?' Bah! Instead of listening to me, he flourished an open letter, saying: 'This letter has been photographed! here is proof of it!' and he pointed to a little yellow spot on the paper, shrieking out: 'Look! Smell! It is—' I forget the name he called it, but some acid used by photographers."

"I know, I know," said M. Verduret; "go on; what next?"

"Then we had a scene; such a scene! He ended by seizing me by the coat collar, and shaking me like a plum tree, to make me tell him who I am, who I know, and where I came

from. As if I know, myself! I was obliged to account for every minute of my time since I had been in his service. He was born to be an investigating magistrate. Then he sent for the hotel waiter, who attends to his rooms, and questioned him closely, but in English, so that I could not understand. After a while he cooled down, and, when the waiter was gone, presented me with twenty francs, saying: 'I am sorry I was so hasty with you; you are too stupid to have been guilty of the offense.'"

"He said that, did he?"—"He used those very words to my face, master."

"And you think he meant what he said?"—"Certainly I do."

The stout man smiled, and whistled in a way that showed that he had a different opinion. "If you think that," he said, "De Clameran was right. You are not up to much." It was easy to see that Joseph Dubois was anxious to give his grounds for his opinion, but dared not. "I suppose I *am* stupid, if you think so," he replied humbly. "Well, after he had done blustering about the letters, the marquis dressed and went out. He would not take his carriage, but hired a cab at the hotel door. I thought he would perhaps disappear forever; but I was mistaken. About five o'clock he returned as gay as a lark. During his absence, I telegraphed to you."

"What! did you not follow him?"

"No; but one of our friends did, and this friend gave me a report of the dandy's movements. First he went to a broker's, then to a bank and a discount office. It is evident he is a man of capital. I expect he intends to go on a little trip somewhere."—"Is that all he did?"—"That is all; yes. But I must tell you that the rascals tried to get Mademoiselle Palmyre shut up, 'administratively,' you understand. Fortunately, you had anticipated something of the kind, and given orders so as to prevent it. But for you she would now be in prison." Joseph left off speaking, and looked up at the ceiling by way of trying to remember whether he had not something more to say. Finding nothing, he added: "That is all. I rather think M. Patrigent will rub his hands with delight when I take him my report. He has no idea of the facts collected to swell the size of his File Number 113."

There was a long silence. Joseph was right in supposing that the crisis had come. M. Verduret was arranging his plan of battle while waiting for the report of Nina—now Palmyre—

upon which depended his point of attack. Joseph Dubois was restless and uneasy. "What am I to do now, master?" he asked.

"Return to the hotel; probably your master has noticed your absence; but he will say nothing about it, so continue—" Here an exclamation from Prosper, who was standing near the window, interrupted M. Verduret. "What is the matter?" he inquired.—"De Clameran is there!" replied Prosper.

M. Verduret and Joseph ran to the window. "Where is he?" they asked.—"There, at the corner of the bridge, behind the orange-woman's stall."

Prosper was right. It was the noble Marquis de Clameran, who, hid behind the stall, was watching for his servant to come out of the Grand Archangel. At first the quick-sighted Verduret had some doubts whether it was the marquis, who, being skilled in these hazardous expeditions, managed to conceal himself almost entirely. But a moment came when, elbowed by the pressing crowd, he was obliged to get off the pavement in full view of the window.

"Now you see I was right!" cried the cashier.

"Well," murmured Joseph, convinced, "I am amazed!"

M. Verduret seemed not in the least surprised, but quietly said: "The hunter is now being hunted. Well, Joseph, my boy, do you still think that your noble master was duped by your pretended injured innocence?"—"You stated the contrary, sir," replied Joseph in a humble tone; "and a statement from you is more convincing than all the proofs in the world."

"This pretended outburst of rage was premeditated on the part of your noble master. Knowing that he is being tracked, he naturally wishes to discover who his adversaries are. You can imagine how uncomfortable he must be while in this uncertainty. Perhaps he thinks his pursuers are some of his old accomplices, who, being hungry, want a piece of his cake. He will remain there until you go out; then he will come in to inquire who you are."

"But I can leave without his seeing me."—"Yes, I know. You will climb the little wall separating the hotel from the wine-merchant's yard, and keep along the stationer's area, until you reach the Rue de la Huchette." Poor Joseph looked as if he had just received a bucket of ice-water upon his head. "Exactly the way I was going," he gasped out. "I heard that you knew all the houses in Paris, and it certainly must be so."

The stout man made no reply to Joseph's admiring remarks.

He was wondering what advantage he could reap from De Clameran's behavior. As to the cashier, he listened wonderingly, watching these strangers, who without any apparent reason, seemed determined to win the difficult game in which his honor, his happiness, and his life, were at stake.

"I have another idea," said Joseph after deep thought.—"What is it?"—"I can walk quietly out of the front door, and, with my hands in my pockets, stroll slowly back to the Hotel du Louvre."

"And then?"—"Well! then, De Clameran will come in and question Madame Alexandre, whom you can instruct beforehand; and she is smart enough to put any joker off the track."

"Bad plan!" pronounced M. Verduret decidedly; "a scamp so compromised as De Clameran is not easily taken in; it will be impossible to reassure him." His mind was made up; for in a brief tone of authority, which admitted of no contradiction, he added: "I have a better plan. Has De Clameran, since he found out that his papers had been touched, seen De Lagors?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps he has written to him?"—"I'll bet you my head he has not. Having your orders to watch his correspondence, I invented a little system which informs me every time he touches a pen; during the last twenty-four hours the pens have not been touched."

"De Clameran went out yesterday afternoon."—"But the man who followed him says he wrote nothing on the way."—"Then we have time yet!" cried Verduret. "Be quick! I give you fifteen minutes to make yourself another head; you know the sort; I will watch the rascal until you are ready."

The delighted Joseph disappeared in a twinkling, and Prosper and M. Verduret remained at the window observing De Clameran, who, according to the movements of the crowd, kept disappearing and reappearing, but was evidently determined not to quit his post until he had obtained the information he sought.

"Why do you devote yourself exclusively to the marquis?" asked Prosper.—"Because, my friend," replied M. Verduret, "because—that is my business, and not yours."

Joseph Dubois had been granted a quarter of an hour in which to metamorphose himself; before ten minutes had elapsed he reappeared. The dandified coachman with whiskers, red vest, and foppish manners, was replaced by a sinister-looking individual, whose very appearance was enough to scare any

rogue. His black cravat twisted round a paper collar, and ornamented by an imitation diamond pin; his black frock coat buttoned up to the chin; his greasy hat and shiny boots and heavy cane—revealed the myrmidon of the Rue de Jerusalem as plainly as the uniform denotes the soldier. Joseph Dubois had vanished, and from his livery, phenix-like and triumphant, rose the radiant Fanferlot, surnamed the Squirrel. When he entered the room, Prosper uttered a cry of surprise, almost of terror. He recognized the man who had assisted the commissary of police in his investigation at the bank on the day of the robbery.

M. Verduret examined his follower with a satisfied look, and said: "Not bad! There is enough of the police-court air about you to alarm even an honest man. You understand me perfectly." Fanferlot was transported with delight at this compliment. "What must I do now, chief?" he inquired.—"Nothing difficult for a smart man: but remember, upon the precision of our movements depends the success of my plan. Before occupying myself with De Lagors, I wish to dispose of De Clameran. Now that the rascals are separated, we must prevent their coming together again."—"I understand," said Fanferlot, winking his eye; "I am to create a diversion."

"Exactly. Go out by the Rue de la Huchette, and hasten to the Pont St. Michel; loaf along the river-bank, and finally place yourself on some of the steps of the quay, so that De Clameran may perceive he is being watched. If he fails to see you, do something to attract his attention."—"I know! I will throw a stone in the water," said Fanferlot, rubbing his hands with delight at his own brilliant idea.

"As soon as De Clameran has seen you," continued M. Verduret, "he will be alarmed, and instantly decamp. You must follow him, and he, knowing that the police are after him, will do everything to escape you. You must keep both your eyes open, for he is a cunning rascal."—"I was not born yesterday."—"So much the better. You can convince him of that. Well, knowing you are at his heels, he will not dare to return to the Hotel du Louvre, for fear of finding some troublesome visitors awaiting him. Now it is very important that he should not return to the hotel."

"But suppose he does?" said Fanferlot.

M. Verduret thought for a minute, and then replied: "It is not at all likely; but if he should, you must wait until he comes

out again, and continue to follow him. But he won't enter the hotel; very likely he will take the train; but in that event don't lose sight of him, no matter if you have to follow him to Siberia. Have you money with you?"—"I will get some from Madame Alexandre."

"Very good. Ah! one word more. If the rascal does take the train, send me a line here. If he beats about the bush until night-time, be on your guard, especially in lonely places; he is capable of anything."—"If necessary, may I fire?"—"Don't be rash; but if he attacks you, of course defend yourself. Come, 'tis time you were gone."

Dubois-Fanferlot went out. M. Verduret and Prosper resumed their post of observation. "Why all this secrecy?" inquired Prosper. "De Clameran is guilty of ten times worse crimes than I was ever accused of, and yet my disgrace was made as public as possible."

"Don't you understand," replied the stout man, "that I wish to separate Raoul's cause from that of the marquis? But, hush! Look!" De Clameran had left his place near the orange-woman's stand and approached the parapet of the bridge, where he seemed to be trying to make out some unexpected object. "Ah!" murmured M. Verduret; "he has just discovered our man." De Clameran's uneasiness was quite apparent; he walked forward a few steps, as if intending to cross the bridge; then, suddenly turning round, walked rapidly away in the direction of the Rue St. Jacques. "He is caught!" cried M. Verduret with delight.

At that moment the door opened, and Madame Nina Gipsy, *alias* Palmyre Chocareille, entered. Poor Nina! Each day since she entered Madeleine's service seemed to have aged her a year. Tears had dimmed the brilliancy of her beautiful black eyes; her rosy cheeks were pale and hollow, and her merry smile was quite gone. Poor Gipsy, once so gay and spirited, now crushed beneath the burden of her sorrows, was the picture of misery. Prosper thought that, wild with joy at seeing him, and proud of having so nobly devoted herself to his interests, Nina would throw her arms around his neck and hold him in a tight embrace. He was mistaken; and though entirely devoted to Madeleine since he knew the reason of her harshness to him, his deception affected him deeply. Nina scarcely seemed to know him. She saluted him timidly, almost like a stranger. She stood looking at M. Verduret with a mixture

of fear and devotion, like a poor dog that has been cruelly treated by its master.

He, however, was kind and gentle in his manner toward her. "Well, my dear," he asked encouragingly, "what news do you bring me?"

"Something is going on at the house, sir, and I have been trying to get here to tell you; at last Mademoiselle Madeleine made an excuse for sending me out."

"You must thank her for her confidence in me. I suppose she carried out the plan we decided upon?"—Yes, sir."—"She receives the Marquis de Clameran's visits?"—"Since the marriage has been decided upon, he comes every day, and mademoiselle receives him with kindness. He seems to be delighted."

These answers filled Prosper with anger and alarm. The poor fellow, not comprehending M. Verduret's intricate moves, felt as if he were being tossed about from pillar to post, and made the tool and laughing-stock of everybody. "What!" he cried; "this worthless Marquis de Clameran, an assassin and a thief, allowed to visit at M. Fauvel's and pay his addresses to Madeleine? Where are the promises which you made me, sir? Have you merely been amusing yourself by raising my hopes, to dash them—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Verduret harshly; "you are really too good a young man to understand anything, my friend. If you are incapable of helping yourself, at least have sense enough to refrain from stupidly importuning those who are working for you. Do you not think you have already done sufficient mischief?" Having administered this rebuke, he turned to Nina, and said in softer tones: "Go on, my child; what have you discovered?"

"Nothing positive, sir; but enough to make me nervous, and fearful of impending danger. I am not certain, but suspect from appearances that some dreadful catastrophe is about to happen. It may only be a presentiment. I can not get any information from Madame Fauvel; she moves about like a ghost, never opening her lips. She seems to be afraid of her niece, and to be trying to conceal something from her."

"What about M. Fauvel?"—"I was just about to tell you, sir. Some fearful misfortune has happened to him, you may depend upon it. He wanders about as if he had lost his mind. Something certainly occurred yesterday; his voice even is

changed. He is so harsh and irritable that mademoiselle and M. Lucien were wondering what could be the matter with him. He seems to be on the eve of giving way to a burst of anger; and there is a wild, strange look about his eyes, especially when he looks at madame. Yesterday evening, when M. de Clameran was announced, he jumped up and hurried out of the room, saying that he had some work to do in his study."

A triumphant exclamation from M. Verduret interrupted Nina. He was radiant. "Ah!" he said to Prosper, forgetting his bad humor of a few minutes before; "ah! what did I tell you?"—"He has evidently—"—"Been afraid to give way to his first impulse; of course he has. He is now seeking for proofs of your assertions. He must have them by this time. Did the ladies go out yesterday?"—"Yes, a part of the day."—"What became of M. Fauvel?"—"The ladies took me with them; we left M. Fauvel at home."

"There is no longer a doubt now!" cried the stout man; "he looked for proofs and found them too! Your letter told him exactly where to go. Ah, Prosper, that unfortunate letter gives more trouble than everything else together."

These words seemed to throw a sudden light on Nina's mind. "I understand it now!" she exclaimed. "M. Fauvel knows everything."—"That is, he thinks he knows everything; and what he has been led to believe is worse than the true state of affairs."

"That accounts for the order which M. Cavaillon overheard him give to his valet, Evariste."—"What order?"—"He told Evariste to bring every letter that came to the house, no matter to whom addressed, into his study, and hand it to him; saying that if this order was disobeyed he should be instantly discharged."

"At what time was this order given?" asked M. Verduret.—"Yesterday afternoon."

"That is what I was afraid of," cried M. Verduret. "He has clearly made up his mind what course to pursue, and is keeping quiet so as to make his vengeance more sure. The question is, Have we still time to counteract his projects? Have we time to convince him that the anonymous letter was incorrect in some of its assertions?" He tried to hit upon some plan for repairing the damage done by Prosper's foolish letter. "Thank you for your information, my dear child," he said after

a long silence. "I will decide at once what steps to take, for it will never do to sit quietly and let things go on in this way. Return home without delay, and be careful of everything you say and do; for M. Fauvel suspects you of being in the plot. Send me word of anything that happens, no matter how insignificant it may be."

Nina, thus dismissed, did not move, but asked timidly: "What about Caldas, sir?" This was the third time during the last fortnight that Prosper had heard this name, Caldas. The first time, it had been whispered in his ear by a respectable-looking, middle-aged man, who promised him his protection on one of the days he was at the Prefecture. The second time, the investigating magistrate had mentioned it in connection with Nina's history.

Prosper thought over all the men he had ever been connected with, but could recall none named Caldas.

The impassible M. Verduret started and trembled at the sound of this name, but quickly recovering himself, said: "I promised to find him for you, and I will keep my promise. Now you must go; good-by."

It was twelve o'clock, and M. Verduret suddenly remembered that he was hungry. He called Madame Alexandre, and the all-powerful hostess of the Grand Archangel soon placed a tempting breakfast before Prosper and his protector. But the dainty meal failed to smooth M. Verduret's perplexed brow. To the eager questions and complimentary remarks of Madame Alexandre, he merely answered: "Hush, hush! let me alone; keep quiet."

For the first time since he had known the stout man, Prosper saw him betray anxiety and hesitation. He remained silent as long as he could, and then uneasily said: "I am afraid I have embarrassed you very much, sir."

"Yes, you have dreadfully embarrassed me," replied M. Verduret. "What on earth to do now I don't know! Shall I hasten matters, or keep quiet and wait for the next move? And I am bound by a sacred promise. Come, I must go and consult the investigating magistrate. He can perhaps assist me. You had better come too."

XXIII

AS M. Verduret had anticipated, Prosper's anonymous letter had a terrible effect upon M. Fauvel. It was morning. M. Fauvel had just entered his study to attend to his correspondence. After opening a dozen letters on business, his eyes fell on the fatal missive. Something about the handwriting struck him as peculiar. It was evidently disguised, and although, owing to the fact of his being a millionaire, he was in the habit of receiving anonymous communications, sometimes abusive, but generally begging for money, this particular letter filled him with a presentiment of evil. With absolute certainty that he was about to read of some calamity, he broke the seal, and unfolding the coarse writing-paper of the cafe, commenced to read. What he read was a terrible blow to a man whose life hitherto had been an unbroken chain of prosperity, who could recall the past without one bitter regret, without remembering any sorrow deep enough to bring forth a tear. What! his wife deceive him! And among all men, to choose one vile enough to rob her of her jewels, and force her to be his accomplice in the ruin of an innocent young man! For did not the letter before him assert this to be the fact, and tell him how to convince himself of its truth? M. Fauvel was as bewildered as if he had been knocked on the head with a club. It was impossible for his scattered ideas to take in the enormity of what these dreadful words intimated. He seemed to be mentally and physically paralyzed, as he sat there staring blankly at the letter. But in a few minutes his reason returned.

"What infamous cowardice!" he cried; "it is abominable!" And he angrily crumpled up the letter and threw it into the empty fireplace, adding: "I will forget having read it. I will not soil my mind by letting it dwell upon such turpitude!"

He said this, and he thought it; but, for all that, he could not open the rest of his letters. That penetrating, clinging, all-corroding worm, suspicion, had taken possession of his soul; and he leaned over his desk, with his face buried in his hands, vainly endeavoring to recover his habitual calmness of mind.

"Supposing, though, that the letter stated the truth!" At the thought, his dejection of the first few minutes gave way to the most violent rage. "Ah!" he exclaimed in his wrath, "if I only knew the scoundrel who dared to write this; if I only had him here!" Thinking that the handwriting might throw some light on the mystery, he picked the fatal letter out of the fireplace. Carefully smoothing it out, he laid it on his desk, and studied the upstrokes, the downstrokes, and the capitals of every word. "It must be from one of my clerks," he thought, "who is angry with me for having refused to raise his salary; or for some other reason." Clinging to this idea, he thought over all the young men in his bank; but not one could he believe capable of resorting to so base a vengeance. Then he wondered where the letter had been posted, thinking this might throw some light on the mystery. He looked at the envelope, and read on the postmark, "Rue du Cardinal Lemoine." This fact told him nothing. Once more he read the letter through, spelling over each word, and analyzing every sentence it contained. It is the custom to treat anonymous letters with silent contempt, as the malicious lies of cowards who dare not say to a man's face what they secretly commit to paper. Yet what innumerable catastrophes can be traced to no other origin. One throws the letters in the fire, but, although the paper is destroyed by the flames, doubts remain, and, like a subtle poison, penetrate the inmost recesses of the mind, weaken its holiest beliefs, and destroy its faith. The wife suspected, no matter how unjustly, is no longer the wife in whom her husband trusted as he would trust himself. Unable to struggle any longer against these conflicting doubts, M. Fauvel determined to resolve them by showing the letter to his wife; but a shocking thought, more torturing than a red-hot iron burning his flesh, made him sink back in his chair in despair. "Suppose it be true!" he muttered to himself; "suppose I have been miserably duped! By confiding in my wife, I shall put her on her guard, and lose all chance of discovering the truth."

Thus were realized all M. Verduret's presumptions. He had said: "M. Fauvel does not yield to his first impulse; if he stops to reflect, we have time to repair the harm done." And after long and painful meditation, the banker had finally decided to wait and watch his wife. It was a hard struggle for a man of his frank, upright nature to play the part of a domestic spy and jealous husband. Accustomed to give way to sudden bursts

of anger, but quickly mastering them, he would find it difficult to preserve his self-restraint, to maintain silence until his proofs were overwhelming. There was one simple means of ascertaining the truth. The letter stated that his wife's diamonds had been pawned. If it lied in this instance, he would treat it with the scorn it deserved. At this moment the servant announced that lunch was served, and M. Fauvel looked in the glass before leaving his study, to see if his face betrayed the emotion he felt. He was shocked at the sight of his haggard features. "Shall I be able to control my feelings?" he asked himself. At table he did his utmost to look unconcerned, talked incessantly, related several stories, hoping thus to distract the attention of the others. But all the time he was talking he was casting over in his mind various expedients for getting his wife out of the house long enough for him to search her room. At last he asked Madame Fauvel if she were going out at all that day.

"Yes," she replied, "the weather is dreadful, but Madeleine and I have some pressing matters to see after."—"At what time do you think of starting?"—"Immediately after lunch."

He drew a long breath as if relieved of a great weight. In a short time he would be able to learn the truth. His uncertainty was so torturing that anything was preferable to it, even the most dreadful reality. Lunch over, he lighted a cigar, but did not remain in the dining-room to smoke, as was his habit. He went into his study, pretending he had some pressing work to attend to. He took the precaution to send Lucien out so as to be quite alone. After the lapse of half an hour, he heard the carriage drive away with his wife and niece. Hurrying into Madame Fauvel's room, he opened her jewel drawer. Several of the cases he knew she possessed were missing, those that remained—there were ten or twelve of them—were empty. The anonymous letter had told the truth. "Oh, it can not be!" he gasped in broken tones. "It is not possible!" He wildly pulled open other drawers in the hope of finding the jewels. Perhaps his wife kept them elsewhere. She might have sent some of them to be reset, and others to be mended. But he found nothing! He then recollected the Jandidier ball, and that he, full of pride, had said to his wife: "Why don't you wear your diamonds?" She had smilingly replied: "Oh! what is the use? Everybody knows them so well; I shall be more noticed if I don't wear them; and besides, they wouldn't suit

my costume." Yes, she had made this answer without blushing, without showing the slightest sign of agitation. What base hypocrisy concealed beneath an innocent, confiding manner! And she had been thus deceiving him for twenty years! But suddenly a gleam of hope penetrated his confused mind—slight, barely possible; still a straw to cling to: "Perhaps Valentine has put her diamonds in Madeleine's room." Without stopping to consider the indelicacy of what he was about to do, he hurried into the young girl's room, and pulled open one drawer after another. He did not find his wife's—not Madame Fauvel's diamonds—but he discovered seven or eight jewel cases belonging to Madeleine, and all empty. Great heavens! Was this gentle girl, whom he had treated as a daughter, an accomplice in this deed of shame? This last blow was too much for the miserable man. He sank almost lifeless into a chair, and wringing his hands, groaned over the wreck of his happiness. Was this the happy future to which he had looked forward? Was the fabric of his honor, well-being, and domestic bliss to be dashed to the earth and forever lost in a day? Seemingly nothing was changed in his existence; he was not materially injured; the objects around him remained the same; and yet what a commotion had taken place, a commotion more unheard of, more surprising than the changing of night into day. What! Valentine, the pure young girl whom he had so loved and married in spite of her poverty; Valentine, the tender, loving wife, who had become dearer and dearer to him as years rolled on; could she have been deceiving him? She, the mother of his sons! His sons? Bitter thought! Were they his sons? If she could deceive him now when she was silver-haired, had she not deceived him when she was young? Not only did he suffer in the present, but the uncertainty of the past tortured his soul.

M. Fauvel did not long remain in this dejected state. Anger and a thirst for vengeance gave him fresh strength, and he determined to sell his past happiness dearly. He well knew that the fact of the diamonds being missing was not sufficient ground upon which to base an accusation. But he had plenty of means of procuring other proofs. He began by calling his valet, and ordering him to bring to him every letter that should come to the house. He then telegraphed to a notary at St. Remy for minute and authentic information about the De Lagors family, and especially about Raoul. Finally, following the advice of the anonymous letter, he went to the Prefecture

of Police, hoping to obtain De Clameran's biography. But the police, fortunately for many people, are as discreetly silent as the grave. They guard their secrets as a miser his treasure. Nothing but an order from the Public Prosecutor could reveal the secrets of those terrible green boxes which are kept in an apartment by themselves, guarded like a banker's strong-room. M. Fauvel was politely asked what motives urged him to inquire into the past life of a French citizen; and, as he declined to state his reasons, he was told he had better apply to the above-mentioned functionary. This advice he could not follow. He had sworn that the secret of his wrongs should be confined to the three persons interested. He chose to avenge his own injuries, to be alone the judge and executioner. He returned home more enraged than ever; there he found a telegram answering the one which he had sent to St. Remy. It was as follows: "The De Lagors are very poor, and there has never been any member of the family named Raoul. Madame De Lagors has no son, only two daughters." This information was the final blow. The banker thought, when he discovered his wife's infamy, that she had sinned as deeply as woman could sin; but he now saw that she had practised a deception more shocking than the crime itself.

"Wretched creature!" he cried with anguish; "in order to see her lover constantly, she dared present him to me under the name of a nephew who never existed. She had the shameless courage to introduce him beneath my roof, and seat him at my fireside, between myself and my sons; and I, confiding fool that I was, welcomed the villain, and lent him money."

Nothing could equal the pain of wounded pride and mortification which he suffered at the thought that Raoul and Madame Fauvel had amused themselves with his good-natured credulity. Nothing but death could wipe out an injury of this nature. But the very bitterness of his resentment enabled him to restrain himself until the time for punishment came. With grim satisfaction he promised himself that his acting would be as successful as theirs. That day he succeeded in concealing his agitation, and kept up a flow of talk during the whole time the dinner lasted. But at about nine o'clock, when De Clameran called, he hastened from the house, for fear that he would be unable to control his indignation, and did not return home until late in the night. The next day he reaped the fruit of his prudence. Among the letters which

his valet brought him at noon, was one bearing the postmark of Vesinet. He carefully opened the envelope, and read:

"Dear Aunt—It is imperatively necessary for me to see you to-day; so I expect you. I will explain why I am prevented from calling at your house. Raoul."

"I have them now!" cried M. Fauvel, trembling with satisfaction at the near prospect of vengeance. Eager to lose no time, he opened a drawer, took out a revolver, and examined the hammer to see if it worked easily. He certainly imagined himself alone, but a vigilant eye was watching his movements. Nina immediately upon her return from the Grand Archangel, stationed herself at the keyhole of the study door, and saw all that occurred. M. Fauvel laid the weapon on the mantelpiece and nervously resealed the letter, which he then took to the place where the letters were usually left, not wishing his wife to know that Raoul's letter had passed through his hands. He was only absent a few minutes, but inspired by the imminence of the danger, Nina darted into the study, and rapidly extracted the cartridges from the revolver. "By this means," she murmured, "the immediate peril is averted, and M. Verduret will now perhaps have time to act. I must send Cavaillon to tell him what is happening."

She hurried downstairs, and sent the clerk with a message, telling him to leave it with Madame Alexandre, if M. Verduret had left the hotel. An hour later, Madame Fauvel ordered her carriage, and went out. M. Fauvel jumped into a hackney-coach, and followed her. "God grant that M. Verduret may be in time!" said Nina to herself, "otherwise Madame Fauvel and Raoul are lost."

XXIV

THE day that the Marquis de Clameran perceived that Raoul de Lagors was the only obstacle between him and Madeleine, he swore that the obstacle should be removed. He at once took steps for the accomplishment of his purpose. As

Raoul was walking home at Vesinet about midnight, he was assailed at a lonely spot not far from the station by three men, who, determined, so they said, to see the time by his watch, fell upon him suddenly, and but for Raoul's wonderful strength and agility, would have left him dead on the spot. As it was, he soon, by his skilfully plied blows, for he was proficient in fencing, and had learned boxing in England, made his enemies take to their heels. He quietly continued his walk home, fully determined in future to be well armed when he went out at night. He never for an instant suspected his accomplice of having instigated the assault. But two days afterward while sitting in a cafe he frequented, a burly, vulgar-looking man, a stranger to him, tried to draw him into a quarrel about nothing and finally threw a card in his face, saying he was ready to grant him satisfaction when and where he pleased. Raoul rushed toward the man to chastise him on the spot; but his friends held him back.

"Very well, then," said he; "be at home to-morrow morning, sir, and I will send two of my friends to you." As soon as the stranger had left, Raoul recovered from his excitement and began to wonder what could have been the motive for this evidently premeditated insult. Picking up the card of the bully, he read:

W. H. B. Jacobson.
Formerly Garibaldian volunteer.
Ex-staff-officer of the armies of the South.
(Italy, America).
30, Rue Leonie.

"Oh! oh!" thought Raoul, "this glorious soldier may very possibly have won his laurels in a fencing school!"

Still the insult had been offered in the presence of others; and, no matter who the offender was, it must be noticed. Raoul requested two of his friends to call upon M. Jacobson early the next morning, and make arrangements for the duel. It was settled that they should render him an account of their mission at the Hotel du Louvre, where he arranged to sleep. Everything being arranged, Raoul went out to find out something about M. Jacobson. He was an expert at the business, but he had considerable trouble. The information he obtained was not very promising. M. Jacobson, who lived in a very suspicious-looking little hotel, frequented chiefly by women of

loose character, was described to him as an eccentric gentleman whose means of livelihood was a problem difficult to solve. He reigned despotically at a cheap restaurant near by, went out a great deal, came home very late, and seemed to have no capital to live upon save his military titles, his talent for entertaining, and a notable quantity of various expedients.

"That being his character," thought Raoul, "I can not see what object he can have in picking a quarrel with me. What good will it do him to run a sword through my body? Not the slightest; and moreover, his pugnacious conduct is apt to attract the attention of the police, who, from what I hear, are the last people this warrior would like to have after him. Therefore, for acting as he has done, he must have some reasons which I am unable to discern."

The result of his meditations was, that Raoul, upon his return to the Hotel du Louvre, did not mention a word of his adventure to De Clameran, whom he still found up. At half-past eight his seconds arrived. M. Jacobson had agreed to fight, and had chosen the sword; but it must be that very hour, in the Bois de Vincennes. Raoul felt very uneasy, nevertheless he boldly said: "I accept the gentleman's conditions." They went to the place decided upon, and after an interchange of a few thrusts Raoul was slightly wounded in the right shoulder. The "Ex-staff-officer of the armies of the South" wished to continue the combat, but Raoul's seconds—brave young men—declared that honor was satisfied, and that they had no intention of subjecting their friend's life to unnecessary hazards. The ex-officer was forced to submit, and unwillingly retired from the field. Raoul went home delighted at having escaped with nothing more serious than a little loss of blood, and resolved to keep clear of all so-called Garibaldians in the future. In fact, a night's reflection had convinced him that De Clameran was the instigator of the two attempts on his life. Madame Fauvel having told him what conditions Madeleine placed on her consent to marry, Raoul instantly saw how necessary his removal would be, now that he was an impediment in the way of De Clameran's success. He recalled a thousand insignificant events of the last few days, and, on skilfully questioning the marquis, had his suspicions changed into certainty. This conviction that the man whom he had so materially assisted in his criminal plans, had hired assassins to make away with him, made him mad with rage. This

treason seemed to him monstrous. He was as yet not sufficiently experienced in ruffianism to know that one villain always sacrifices another to advance his own projects; he was credulous enough to believe in the old adage of "honor among thieves." His rage was naturally mingled with fright, well knowing that his life hung by a thread, when it was threatened by a daring scoundrel like De Clameran. Knowing his accomplice's nature, Raoul saw himself surrounded by snares; he saw death before him in every form; he was equally afraid of going out, and of remaining at home. He only ventured with the most suspicious caution into the most public places; he feared poison as much as the assassin's knife, and imagined that every dish placed before him tasted of strychnine. This life of torture was intolerable, so with a desire for revenge as much as with a view of securing his personal safety, he determined to anticipate a struggle which he felt must terminate in the death of either De Clameran or himself. "Better kill the devil," said he, "than be killed by him." In his days of poverty, Raoul had often risked his liberty to obtain a few guineas, and would not have hesitated to make short work of a person like De Clameran. But with money prudence had come. He wished to enjoy his four hundred thousand francs without being compromised by committing a murder which might be discovered; he therefore began to devise some other means of getting rid of his dreaded accomplice. In the mean time, he thought it would be a good thing to thwart De Clameran's marriage with Madeleine. He was sure that he would thus strike him to the heart, and this was at least a satisfaction. Raoul was persuaded that, by openly siding with Madeleine and her aunt, he could save them from De Clameran's clutches. Having fully resolved upon this course, he wrote a note to Madame Fauvel asking for an interview. The poor woman hastened to Vesinet convinced that some new misfortune was in store for her. Her alarm was groundless. She found Raoul more tender and affectionate than he had ever been. He saw the necessity of reassuring her, and winning his old place in her forgiving heart, before making his disclosures. He succeeded. The poor lady had a smiling and happy look as she sat in an armchair, with Raoul kneeling beside her.

"I have distressed you too long, my dear mother," he said in his softest tones; "but I repent sincerely; now listen to me."

He had not time to say more; the door was violently thrown

open, and Raoul, springing to his feet, was confronted by M. Fauvel. The banker had a revolver in his hand, and was ghastly pale. It was evident that he was making superhuman efforts to remain calm, like a judge whose duty it is to justly punish crime.

"Ah," he exclaimed with a horrible laugh, "you look surprised. You did not expect me? You thought that my imbecile credulity assured you an eternal immunity!" Raoul had the courage to place himself before Madame Fauvel, and to stand prepared to receive the expected bullet. "I assure you, uncle," he began. "Enough!" interrupted the banker with an angry gesture, "let me hear no more infamous falsehoods! End this odious comedy, of which I am no longer the dupe."

"I swear to you—"

"Spare yourself the trouble of denying anything. Do you not see that I know all? I know who pawned my wife's diamonds. I know who committed the robbery for which an innocent man was arrested and imprisoned!"

Madame Fauvel, white with terror, fell upon her knees. At last it had come—the dreadful day had come. Vainly had she added falsehood to falsehood; vainly had she sacrificed herself and others; all was discovered. She saw that she was lost, and wringing her hands, with her face bathed in tears, she moaned: "Pardon, Andre! I beg you, forgive me!"

At these heart-broken tones, the banker shook like a leaf. This voice brought before him the twenty years of happiness which he had owed to this woman who had always been the mistress of his heart, whose slightest wish had been his law, and who, by a smile or a frown, could make him the happiest or the most miserable of men. Could this wretched woman crouching at his feet be his beloved Valentine, the pure, innocent girl whom he had found secluded in the chateau of La Verberie? Could this be the cherished wife whom he had worshiped for so many years? In the memory of his lost happiness never to return he seemed to forget the present, and was almost melted to forgiveness. "Unhappy woman," he murmured, "unhappy woman! What had I done that you should thus deceive me? Ah, my only fault was loving you too deeply, and letting you see it. One wearies of everything in this world, even happiness. Did pure domestic joys pall upon you and weary you, driving you to seek the excitement of sinful passion? Were you so tired of the atmosphere of

respect and affection which surrounded you that you must needs risk your honor and mine by braving public opinion? Oh, into what an abyss you have fallen, Valentine! If you were wearied by my constant devotion, had the thought of your children no power to restrain your evil passions?"

M. Fauvel spoke slowly, with painful effort, as if each word choked him. Raoul, who listened with attention, saw that if the banker knew some things, he certainly did not know all. He saw that erroneous information had misled the unhappy man, and that he was a victim of false appearances. He determined to convince him of the mistake under which he was laboring. "Sir," he began, "will you consent to listen—"

But the sound of Raoul's voice was sufficient to break the charm. "Silence!" cried the banker with an angry oath; "silence!" For some moments nothing was heard but the sobs of Madame Fauvel.

"I came here," continued the banker, "with the intention of surprising and killing you both. I have surprised you, but—my courage, yes, my courage fails me—I can not kill an unarmed man." Raoul once more tried to speak. "Let me finish!" interrupted M. Fauvel. "Your life is in my hands; the law excuses the vengeance of an outraged husband, but I refuse to take advantage of it. I see on your mantelpiece a revolver similar to mine; take it, and defend yourself."

"Never!"—"Defend yourself!" cried the banker, raising his weapon; "if you do not—"

Seeing the barrel of M. Fauvel's revolver close to his breast, Raoul, in self-defense, seized his own and prepared to fire. "Stand in that corner of the room, and I will stand in this," continued the banker; "and when the clock strikes, which will be in a few seconds, we will both fire together."

They took the places designated, and stood perfectly still. But the horror of the scene was too much for Madame Fauvel to witness it any longer without interposing. She understood but one thing: her son and her husband were about to kill each other before her eyes. Fright and horror gave her strength to rise and rush between the two men.

"For God's sake, have mercy, Andre!" she cried, turning to her husband and wringing her hands with anguish; "let me tell you everything; don't kill him."

M. Fauvel mistook this burst of maternal love for the pleadings of a guilty wife defending her lover. He roughly seized

his wife by the arm and thrust her aside: "Get out of the way!" he cried. But she would not be repulsed; rushing up to Raoul, she threw her arms around him, and said to her husband: "Kill me, and me alone; for I alone am guilty."

At these words M. Fauvel's rage knew no bounds; he deliberately took aim at the guilty pair and fired. As neither Raoul nor Madame Fauvel fell, the banker fired a second time; then a third. He was preparing for a fourth shot when a man rushed into the room, snatched the revolver from the banker's hand, and, throwing him on the sofa, ran toward Madame Fauvel. This man was M. Verduret, who had been warned by Cavaillon, but who did not know that Nina had withdrawn the charges from M. Fauvel's weapon. "Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, "she is unhurt."

But the banker had already regained his feet. "Leave me alone," he cried, struggling to get free; "I will have vengeance!" M. Verduret seized his wrists in a viselike grasp, and in a solemn tone, so as to give more weight to his words, he said: "Thank God you are saved from committing a terrible crime; the anonymous letter deceived you."

M. Fauvel never once thought of asking this stranger who he was and where he came from. He heard and understood but one fact: the anonymous letter had lied. "But my wife confesses her guilt," he stammered. "Yes," replied M. Verduret, "but not of the crime you imagine. Do you know who that man is that you wish to kill?"

"Her lover!"

"No: her son!"

The presence of this well-informed stranger seemed to confound Raoul and to frighten him more than M. Fauvel's threats had done. Yet he had sufficient presence of mind to say: "It is the truth!"

The banker looked wildly from Raoul to M. Verduret; then, fastening his haggard eyes on his wife, exclaimed: "What you tell me is not possible! Give me proofs!"—"You shall have proofs," replied M. Verduret; "but first listen."

And rapidly he related the principal events of the drama he had discovered. The true state of the case was terribly distressing to M. Fauvel, but nothing compared with what he had suspected. His throbbing, yearning heart told him that he still loved his wife. Why should he punish a fault committed so very long ago, and atoned for by twenty years of devotion and

suffering? For some moments after M. Verduret had finished his explanation, M. Fauvel remained silent. So many strange events had happened, following each other in such quick succession, and culminating in the shocking scene which had just taken place, that M. Fauvel seemed to be too bewildered to think clearly. If his heart counseled pardon and forgetfulness, wounded pride and self-respect demanded vengeance. If Raoul, the baleful witness, the living proof of a far-off sin, were not in existence, M. Fauvel would not have hesitated. Gaston de Clameran was dead; he would have held out his arms to his wife, saying: "Come to my heart! your sacrifices for my honor shall be your absolution; let the sad past be forgotten." But the sight of Raoul froze the words upon his lips.

"So this is your son," said he to his wife, "this man, who has plundered you and robbed me!" Madame Fauvel was unable to utter a word in reply to these reproachful words. "Oh!" said M. Verduret, "madame will tell you that this young man is the son of Gaston de Clameran; she has never doubted it. But, the truth is—"

"What!"

"That, in order to swindle her more easily, he has perpetrated a gross imposture."

During the last few minutes Raoul had been quietly creeping toward the door, hoping to escape while no one was thinking of him. But M. Verduret, who anticipated his intention, was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and stopped him just as he was about leaving the room. "Not so fast, my pretty youth," he said, dragging him into the middle of the apartment; "it is not polite to leave us so unceremoniously. Let us have a little explanation before parting!"

M. Verduret's jeering words and mocking manner were a revelation for Raoul. "The merry-andrew!" he gasped, starting back with an affrighted look.

"The same, my friend," said the stout man. "Ah, now that you recognize me, I confess that the merry-andrew and myself are one and the same; here is proof of it." And turning up his sleeve he showed his bare arm. "I imagine you know the villain that gave me this little decoration that night I was walking along the Rue Bourdaloue. That being the case, you know I have a slight claim upon you, and shall expect you to relate to us your little story." But Raoul was so terrified that he could not utter a word. "Your modesty prevents your speak-

ing," said M. Verduret. "Bravo! modesty belongs to talent, and for one of your age you certainly have displayed a talent for knavery."

M. Fauvel listened without understanding a word of what was said. "Into what abyss of shame have we fallen!" he groaned.—"Reassure yourself, sir," replied M. Verduret in a serious tone. "After what I have been constrained to tell you, what remains to be said is a mere trifle. This is the end of the story. On leaving Mihonne, who had given him a full account of the misfortunes of Mademoiselle Valentine de la Verberie, De Clameran hastened to London. He had no difficulty in finding the farmer's wife to whom the old comtesse had intrusted Gaston's son. But here an unexpected disappointment greeted him. He learned that the child, who was registered on the parish books as Raoul Valentin Wilson, had died of the croup when eighteen months old."

Raoul tried to protest. "Did any one dare say that?" he commenced.

"It was not only stated, but proved, my pretty youth," replied M. Verduret. "You don't suppose I am a man to trust to mere gossip; do you?" He drew from his pocket several stamped documents, and laid them on the table. "These are the declarations of the nurse, her husband, and four witnesses. Here is an extract from the registry of births; this is the certificate of registry of death; and all these are authenticated at the French Embassy. Now, are you satisfied, young man?"

"What next?" inquired M. Fauvel.—"De Clameran," replied M. Verduret, "finding that the child was dead, supposed that he could, in spite of this disappointment, obtain money from Madame Fauvel; he was mistaken. His first attempt failed. Having an inventive turn of mind, he determined that the child should come to life again. Among his large circle of rascally acquaintance, he selected the young fellow who stands before you."

Madame Fauvel was in a pitiable state. And yet she began to feel a ray of hope; her acute anxiety had so long tortured her that the truth was a relief. "Can this be possible?" she murmured, "can it be?"—"What!" cried the banker; "can an infamous plot like this be planned in the present day?"

"All this is false!" said Raoul boldly.

M. Verduret turned to Raoul and, bowing with ironical respect, said: "You desire proofs, sir, do you? You shall cer-

tainly have convincing ones. I have just left a friend of mine, M. Palot, who brought me valuable information from London. Now, my young gentleman, I will tell you the little story he told me, and then you can give your opinion of it. In 1847 Lord Murray, a wealthy and generous nobleman, had a jockey named Spencer, of whom he was very fond. At the Epsom races this jockey was thrown from his horse and killed. Lord Murray grieved over the loss of his favorite, and, having no children of his own, declared his intention of adopting Spencer's son, who was then but four years old. Thus James Spencer was brought up in affluence, as heir to the immense wealth of the noble lord. He was a handsome, intelligent boy, and gave satisfaction to his protector until he was sixteen years of age, when he became intimate with a worthless set of people, and went to the bad. Lord Murray, who was very indulgent, pardoned many grave faults; but one fine morning he discovered that his adopted son had been imitating his signature upon some checks. He indignantly dismissed him from his house, and told him never to show his face there again. James Spencer had been living in London about four years, managing to support himself by gambling and swindling, when he met De Clameran, who offered him twenty-five thousand francs to play a part in a little comedy which he had himself arranged."

"You are a detective!" interrupted Raoul, not caring to hear any more. The stout man smiled blandly.

"At present," he replied, "I am merely Prosper Bertomy's friend. It depends entirely upon yourself as to which character I shall hereafter appear in."

"What do you require me to do?"

"Where are the three hundred and fifty thousand francs which you have stolen?"

The young rascal hesitated a moment and then said: "The money is here."

"Very good. This frankness will be of service to you. I know that the money is in this room, and also that it is at the bottom of that cupboard. Do you intend to refund it?" Raoul saw that his game was lost. He tremblingly went to the cupboard and pulled out several rolls of bank-notes, and an enormous package of pawnbroker's tickets.

"Very well done," said M. Verduret as he carefully examined the money and papers: "this is the most sensible step you ever took." Raoul relied on this moment, when everybody's atten-

tion would be absorbed by the money, to make his escape. He crept toward the door, gently opened it, slipped out, and locked it, for the key was on the outside.

"He has escaped!" cried M. Fauvel.

"Of course," replied M. Verduret without even looking up: "I thought he would have sense enough to do that."

"But is he to go unpunished?"

"My dear sir, would you have this affair become a public scandal? Do you wish your wife's name to be brought into a case of this nature at the police court?"

"Never!"

"Then the best thing you can do is to let the rascal go. Here are receipts for all the articles which he has pawned, so that we should consider ourselves fortunate. He has kept fifty thousand francs, but that is all the better for you. That sum will enable him to leave France, and we shall never see him again."

Like every one else, M. Fauvel yielded to M. Verduret's ascendency. Gradually he had awakened to the true state of affairs; prospective happiness no longer seemed impossible, and he felt that he was indebted to the man before him for more than life. With earnest gratitude he seized M. Verduret's hand as if to carry it to his lips, and said in broken tones: "How can I ever find words to express how deeply I appreciate your kindness? How can I ever repay the great service you have rendered me?" M. Verduret reflected a moment, and then replied: "If you consider yourself under any obligations to me, sir, I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor! Speak, sir, you have but to name it."

"I will not hesitate, then, to explain myself. I am Prosper's friend. You can restore him to his former honorable position. You can do so much for him, sir! he loves Mademoiselle Madeleine—"

"Madeleine shall be his wife, sir," interrupted the banker; "I give you my word. And I will so publicly exonerate him that not a shadow of suspicion will ever rest upon his name."

The stout man quietly took up his hat and cane, as if he had been paying an ordinary call. "You will excuse my importuning you," said he, "but Madame Fauvel—"

"Andre!" murmured the wretched woman, "Andre!"

The banker hesitated a moment, then, following the impulse of his heart, ran to his wife, and, clasping her in his arms, said

tenderly: "No, I will not be foolish enough to struggle against my heart. I do not pardon, Valentine, I forget; I forget all!"

M. Verduret had nothing more to do at Vesinet. Without taking leave of the banker, he unlocked the door, quietly left the room, and, jumping into his cab, ordered the driver to return to Paris and drive to the Hotel du Louvre. His mind was filled with anxiety. He knew that Raoul would give him no more trouble; the young rogue was probably far off by that time. But De Clameran should not escape unpunished; and how this punishment could be brought about without compromising Madame Fauvel was the problem to be solved. M. Verduret thought over various expedients, but not one could be applied to the present circumstances. After long thought he decided that an accusation of poisoning must be made at Oloron. He would go there and work upon "public opinion," so that, to satisfy the townspeople, the authorities would order a post-mortem examination of Gaston's body. But this mode of proceeding required time; and De Clameran would certainly escape before long. He was bemoaning his inability to come to a satisfactory decision, when the cab stopped in front of the Hotel du Louvre. It was almost dark. A crowd of people was collected round about the entrance, eagerly discussing some exciting event which seemed to have just taken place.

"What has happened?" asked M. Verduret of one of the crowd.—"The strangest thing you have ever heard of," replied the man; "yes, I saw it with my own eyes. He first appeared at that seventh-story window; he was only half-dressed. Some men tried to seize him; but, bah! with the agility of a squirrel, he jumped out upon the roof, shrieking: 'Murder! murder!' The recklessness of his conduct led me to suppose—" The gossip stopped short in his narrative, very much surprised and vexed; his questioner had vanished.

"If it should be De Clameran!" thought M. Verduret; "if terror has deranged that brain, so capable of working out great crimes!"

While thus talking to himself, he elbowed his way into the courtyard of the hotel. At the foot of the principal staircase he found M. Fanferlot and three peculiar looking individuals waiting together. "Well!" cried M. Verduret, "what is the matter?" With laudable precision the four men stood at attention. "The chief!" said they.—"Come!" said the stout man

with an oath. "What has happened?"—"This is what has happened, sir," said Fanferlot dejectedly. "I am doomed to ill luck. You see how it is; this is the only chance I ever had of working out a beautiful case, and puff! my criminal goes and sells me."

"Then it is De Clameran who—"

"Of course it is. When the rascal saw me this morning he scampered off like a hare. You should have seen him run; I thought he would never stop this side of Ivry: but not at all. On reaching the Boulevard des Ecoles, a sudden idea seemed to strike him, and he made a bee-line for his hotel; I suppose to secure his pile of money. Directly he gets here, what does he see? These three friends of mine. The sight of these gentlemen had the effect of a sunstroke upon him; he went raving mad on the spot.'

"Where is he now?"

"At the Prefecture, I suppose. Some policemen handcuffed him and drove off with him in a cab."

"Come with me."

M. Verduret and Fanferlot found De Clameran in one of the private cells reserved for dangerous prisoners. He had on a strait-waistcoat and was struggling violently against three men who were striving to hold him, while a physician tried to force him to swallow a potion. "Help!" he shrieked, "help, for God's sake! Do you not see my brother coming after me? Look! he wants to poison me!" M. Verduret took the physician aside, and asked him a few questions. "The wretched man is in a hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret shuddered as he left the Prefecture. "Madame Fauvel is saved," he murmured, "since God has himself punished De Clameran!"

"That doesn't help me in the least," grumbled Fanferlot. "The idea of all my trouble and labor ending in this way!"

"True," replied M. Verduret, "the File Number 113 will never leave its portfolio. But console yourself; before the end of the month I will give you a letter to a friend of mine, and what you have lost in fame you will gain in gold."

XXV

ONE morning some days later, M. Lecoq—the official Lecoq, who resembles the head of a department—was walking up and down his private office, looking at the clock at every moment. At last, a bell rang, and the faithful Janouille ushered in Madame Nina and Prosper Bertomy. "Ah," said M. Lecoq, "you are punctual, my fond lovers; that is well."

"We are not lovers, sir," replied Madame Gipsy. "Only M. Verduret's express orders have brought us together here to meet him."—"Very well," said the celebrated detective; "then be good enough to wait a few minutes: I will tell him you are here."

During the quarter of an hour that Nina and Prosper remained alone together, they did not exchange a word. Finally a door opened, and M. Verduret appeared.

Nina and Prosper eagerly started toward him; but he checked them by one of those looks which no one ever dared resist. "You have come," he said severely, "to hear the secret of my conduct. I have promised, and will keep my word, however painful it may be to my feelings. Listen, then. My best friend is a loyal, honest fellow, named Caldas. Eighteen months ago this friend was the happiest of men. Infatuated by a woman, he lived for her alone, and, fool that he was, imagined that as she owed all to him, she loved him."

"Yes!" cried Nina, "yes, she loved him!"

"So be it. She loved him so much that one fine night she went off with another man. In his first moments of despair, Caldas wished to kill himself. Then he reflected that it would be wiser to live, and avenge himself."

"But then—" faltered Prosper.

"Then Caldas avenged himself in his own way. He made the woman who deceived him recognize his immense superiority over his rival. Weak, timid, and without intelligence, the latter was disgraced and falling into the abyss, when Caldas's powerful hand saved him. For you have understood,

have you not? The woman is Nina; the seducer is yourself; and Caldas is—"

With a quick, dexterous movement he threw off his wig and whiskers, and stood before them the real, intelligent and proud Lecoq.

"Caldas!" cried Nina.

"No, not Caldas, nor Verduret either, but Lecoq, the detective!"

There was a moment of astonished silence, then M. Lecoq turned to Prosper and said: "It is not to me alone that you owe your salvation. A noble girl in confiding in me rendered my task easy. I mean Mademoiselle Madeleine; I promised her that M. Fauvel should never know anything. Your letter made it impossible for me to keep my promise. That is all."

He turned to leave the room, but Nina stopped him. "Caldas," she murmured, "I implore you to have pity on me. I am *so* miserable. Ah, if you only knew! Be forgiving to one who has always loved you, Caldas! Listen—"

. . . . . .

Prosper departed from M. Lecoq's office alone.

On the 15th of last month was celebrated, at the church of Notre Dame de Lorette, the marriage of M. Prosper Bertomy and Mademoiselle Madeleine Fauvel.

The banking-house is still in the Rue de Provence; but as M. Fauvel has determined to retire from business, and live in the country, the name of the firm has been changed, and is now: "Prosper Bertomy & Co."

THE END

THE LITTLE OLD MAN OF BATIGNOLLES

THE LITTLE OLD MAN OF BATIGNOLLES

A CHAPTER OF THE MEMOIRS OF A POLICE AGENT

J. B. CASIMIR GODEUIL

THREE or four months ago, a man of about forty, suitably dressed in black, called at the editorial offices of the "Petit Journal."

He brought a manuscript in a handwriting which would have made the famous Brard, king of calligraphers, faint for joy.

"I shall call again," he told us, "in a fortnight, to find out what you think of my work."

Nobody having curiosity enough to unknot the string, the manuscript was religiously placed in the pile of "Works to be read."

Time passed.

I must add that a great many manuscripts are brought to the "Petit Journal," and that the position of a reader here is not a sinecure.

The gentleman, however, did not appear again, and had been forgotten, when one morning one of our collaborators, who was in charge of the readings, hurried to us excitedly.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, entering, "I just read something truly extraordinary."

"Well, what is it?"

"That gentleman's manuscript—you know, the one all dressed in black—I was completely carried away with it."

And as we made fun of his enthusiasm, he whose profession it is not to get enthusiastic, he threw the manuscript on the table, saying:

"Read it then!"

There was enough of it to seriously puzzle us. One of us took possession of the manuscript, and by the end of the week it had made the round of the editorial office.

And the unanimous opinion was:

The "Petit Journal" must absolutely publish it.

But here one difficulty presented itself, which no one had foreseen:

The author's name was not on the manuscript. There was only a visiting card attached to it, reading: "J. B. Casimir Godeuil."

What was to be done? Publish the work without knowing its author? That would have been dangerous. A man must accept responsibility for every line printed.

It was then decided to search for this too modest author, and for the next few days the editors of the "Petit Journal" inquired and sent for information everywhere.

Nothing. Nobody knew J. B. Casimir Godeuil.

Then, out of desperation, were put up those enigmatic posters, which for a week mystified all Paris, and, to some extent, the suburbs.

"Who can that J. B. Casimir Godeuil be, who is thus advertised for?" people asked themselves.

Some thought him a prodigal child, escaped from his home; others a missing heir, but the most took him to be an absconding cashier.

But our end was attained.

The paste on the posters had not yet dried, when M. J. B. Casimir Godeuil himself appeared, and the "Petit Journal" was arranging with him for the publishing of the tragedy entitled "The Little Old Man of Batignolles," which is the first of the series of his memoirs.*

This said, we shall let M. J. B. Casimir Godeuil speak. His story is preceded by the following short preface, which we thought it best to preserve, as it shows what he was and what praiseworthy purpose he had in view in writing his recollections.

* Unfortunately J. B. Casimir Godeuil, who had promised to bring the continuation of his manuscript, disappeared again completely, and all steps taken to find him have remained unsuccessful. We have, nevertheless, decided to publish his odd narration, which contains one of his most stirring tragedies.—EDITOR'S NOTE.

INTRODUCTION

A PRISONER had just been brought before the trial judge, and, notwithstanding his denials, his evasions, and an alibi which he claimed, was convicted of forgery and burglary.

Overwhelmed by the evidence of the charges I had gathered against him, he confessed his crime, exclaiming:

"Oh! Had I known the power of the courts and the police, and how impossible it is to escape them, I would have remained an honest man."

It was on hearing this that the idea occurred to me to gather together my recollections.

"The people must know!" I said to myself.

And in publishing to-day my memoirs, I hope, nay, I shall even say I am convinced, that I am accomplishing a moral work of the highest utility.

Is it not being useful to strip crime of its sinister romance and expose it as it is: cowardly, ignoble, base, repulsive?

Is it not being useful to prove that there are no beings in the world as wretched as the madmen who have declared war on society?

That is what I claim to do.

I shall establish beyond a doubt that it is one's whole interest—and I add, one's immediate, positive, mathematical, and even discountable interest—to be honest.

I shall prove it as clear as day that with our social organization, thanks to the railroads and to the electric telegraph, escape is impossible.

Punishment may be delayed—but it always comes.

Without doubt there will be some unfortunate ones who will reflect before giving themselves up to crime.

More than one whom the feeble murmuring of conscience

could not hold back will be stopped by the salutary voice of fear.

Must I now explain what these recollections are?

I shall attempt to describe the struggles, the successes, and the defeats of a handful of devoted men charged with the maintenance of safety in Paris.

How many are there to keep in check all the evildoers in a capital which, with its suburbs, numbers more than *three million* inhabitants?

There are two hundred.

It is to them that I dedicate this book.

With this much said, I begin.

THE LITTLE OLD MAN OF BATIGNOLLES

WHEN I had finished my studies in order to become a health officer, a happy time it was, I was twenty-three years of age. I lived in the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, almost at the corner of the Rue Racine.

There I had for thirty francs a month, service included, a furnished room, which to-day would certainly be worth a hundred francs; it was so spacious that I could easily put my arms in the sleeves of my overcoat without opening the window.

Since I left early in the morning to make the calls for my hospital, and since I returned very late, because the Cafe Leroy had irresistible attractions for me, I scarcely knew by sight the tenants in my house, peaceable people all; some living on their incomes, and some small merchants.

There was one, however, to whom, little by little, I became attached.

He was a man of average size, insignificant, always scrupulously shaved, who was pompously called "Monsieur Mechinet."

The doorkeeper treated him with a most particular regard, and never omitted quickly to lift his cap as he passed the lodge.

As M. Mechinet's apartment opened on my landing, directly opposite the door of my room, we repeatedly met face to face. On such occasions we saluted one another.

One evening he came to ask me for some matches; another night I borrowed tobacco of him; one morning it happened that we both left at the same time, and walked side by side for a little stretch, talking.

Such were our first relations.

Without being curious or mistrusting—one is neither at the age I was then—we like to know what to think about people to whom we become attached.

Thus I naturally came to observe my neighbor's way of living, and became interested in his actions and gestures.

He was married. Madame Caroline Mechinet, blonde and fair, small, gay and plump, seemed to adore her husband.

But the husband's conduct was none too regular for that. Frequently he decamped before daylight, and often the sun had set before I heard him return to his domicile. At times he disappeared for whole weeks.

That the pretty little Madame Mechinet should tolerate this is what I could not understand.

Puzzled, I thought that our concierge, ordinarily as much a babbler as a magpie, would give me some explanation.

Not so! Hardly had I pronounced Mechinet's name than, without ceremony, he sent me about my business, telling me, as he rolled his eyes, that he was not in the habit of "spying" upon his tenants.

This reception doubled my curiosity to such an extent that, banishing all shame, I began to watch my neighbor.

I discovered things.

Once I saw him coming home dressed in the latest fashion, his buttonhole ornamented with five or six decorations; the next day I noticed him on the stairway dressed in a sordid blouse, on his head a cloth rag, which gave him a sinister air.

Nor was that all. One beautiful afternoon, as he was going out, I saw his wife accompany him to the threshold of their apartment and there kiss him passionately, saying:

"I beg you, Mechinet, be prudent; think of your little wife."

Be prudent! Why? For what purpose? What did that mean? The wife must then be an accomplice.

It was not long before my astonishment was doubled.

One night, as I was sleeping soundly, some one knocked suddenly and rapidly at my door.

I arose and opened.

M. Mechinet entered, or rather rushed in, his clothing in disorder and torn, his necktie and the front of his shirt torn off, bareheaded, his face covered with blood.

"What has happened?" I exclaimed, frightened.

"Not so loud," said he; "you might be heard. Perhaps it is nothing, although I suffer devilishly. I said to myself that you, being a medical student would doubtless know how to help me."

Without saying a word, I made him sit down, and hastened to examine him and to do for him what was necessary.

Although he bled freely, the wound was a slight one—to tell the truth, it was only a superficial scratch, starting from the left ear and reaching to the corner of his mouth.

The dressing of the wound finished, "Well, here I am again healthy and safe for this time," M. Mechinet said to me. "Thousand thanks, dear Monsieur Godeuil. Above all, as a favor, do not speak to any one of this little accident, and—good night."

"Good night!" I had little thought of sleeping. When I remember all the absurd hypotheses and the romantic imaginations which passed through my brain, I can not help laughing.

In my mind, M. Mechinet took on fantastic proportions.

The next day he came to thank me again, and invited me to dinner.

That I was all eyes and ears when I entered my neighbor's home may be rightly guessed.

In vain did I concentrate my whole attention. I could not find out anything of a nature to dissipate the mystery which puzzled me so much.

However, from this dinner on, our relations became closer. M. Mechinet decidedly favored me with his friendship. Rarely a week passed without his taking me along, as he expressed it, to eat soup with him, and almost daily, at the time for absinthe, he came to meet me at the Cafe Leroy, where we played a game of dominoes.

Thus it was that on a certain evening in the month of July, on a Friday, at about five o'clock, when he was just about to beat me at "full double-six," an ugly-looking bully abruptly entered, and, approaching him, murmured in his ears some words I could not hear.

M. Mechinet rose suddenly, looking troubled.

"I am coming," said he; "run and say that I am coming."

The man ran off as fast as his legs could carry him, and then M. Mechinet offered me his hand.

"Excuse me," added my old neighbor, "duty before everything; we shall continue our game to-morrow."

Consumed with curiosity, I showed great vexation, saying that I regretted very much not accompanying him.

"Well," grumbled he, "why not? Do you want to come? Perhaps it will be interesting."

For all answer, I took my hat and we left.

II

I WAS certainly far from thinking that I was then venturing on one of those apparently insignificant steps which, nevertheless, have a deciding influence on one's whole life.

For once, I thought to myself, I am holding the solution of the enigma!

And full of a silly and childish satisfaction, I trotted, like a lean cat, at the side of M. Mechinet.

I say "trotted," because I had all I could do not to be left behind.

He rushed along, down the Rue Racine, running against the passers-by, as if his fortune depended on his legs.

Luckily, on the Place de l'Odeon a cab came in our way.

M. Mechinet stopped it, and, opening the door, "Get in, Monsieur Godeuil," said he to me.

I obeyed, and he seated himself at my side, after having called to the coachman in a commanding voice: "39 Rue Lecluse, at Batignolles, and drive fast!"

The distance drew from the coachman a string of oaths. Nevertheless he whipped up his broken-down horses and the carriage rolled off.

"Oh! it is to Batignolles we are going?" I asked with a courtier's smile.

But M. Mechinet did not answer me; I even doubt that he heard me.

A complete change took place in him. He did not seem exactly agitated, but his set lips and the contraction of his heavy, brushwood-like eyebrows betrayed a keen preoccupation. His look, lost in space, seemed to be studying there the meaning of some insolvable problem.

He had pulled out his snuff-box and continually took from it enormous pinches of snuff, which he kneaded between the index and thumb, rolled into a ball, and raised it to his nose; but he did not actually snuff.

It was a habit which I had observed, and it amused me very much.

This worthy man, who abhorred tobacco, always carried a snuff-box as large as that of a vaudeville capitalist.

If anything unforeseen happened to him, either agreeable or vexatious, in a trice he had it out, and seemed to snuff furiously.

Often the snuff-box was empty, but his gestures remained the same.

I learned later that this was a system with him for the purpose of concealing his impressions and of diverting the attention of his questioners.

In the mean time we rolled on. The cab easily passed up the Rue de Clichy; it crossed the exterior boulevard, entered the Rue de Lecluse, and soon stopped at some distance from the address given.

It was materially impossible to go farther, as the street was obstructed by a compact crowd.

In front of No. 39, two or three hundred persons were standing, their necks craned, eyes gleaming, breathless with curiosity, and with difficulty kept in bounds by half a dozen *sergents de ville*, who were everywhere repeating in vain and in their roughest voices: "Move on, gentlemen, move on!"

After alighting from the carriage, we approached, making our way with difficulty through the crowd of idlers.

We already had our hands on the door of No. 39, when a police officer rudely pushed us back.

"Keep back! You can not pass!"

My companion eyed him from head to foot, and straightening himself up, said:

"Well, don't you know me? I am Mechinet, and this young man," pointing to me, "is with me."

"I beg your pardon! Excuse me!" stammered the officer, carrying his hand to his three-cocked hat. "I did not know; please enter."

We entered.

In the hall, a powerful woman, evidently the concierge, more red than a peony, was holding forth and gesticulating in the midst of a group of house tenants.

"Where is it?" demanded M. Mechinet gruffly.

"Third floor, monsieur," she replied; "third floor, door to the right. Oh! my God! What a misfortune. In a house like this. Such a good man."

I did not hear more. M. Mechinet was rushing up the stairs, and I followed him, four steps at a time, my heart thumping.

On the third floor the door to the right was open. We entered, went through an anteroom, a dining-room, a parlor, and finally reached a bedroom.

If I live a thousand years I shall not forget the scene which struck my eyes. Even at this moment as I am writing, after many years, I still see it down to the smallest details.

At the fireplace opposite the door two men were leaning on their elbows: a police commissary, wearing his scarf of office, and an examining magistrate.

At the right, seated at a table, a young man, the judge's clerk, was writing.

In the centre of the room, on the floor, in a pool of coagulated and black blood, lay the body of an old man with white hair. He was lying on his back, his arms folded crosswise.

Terrified, I stopped as if nailed to the threshold, so nearly fainting that I was compelled to lean against the door-frame.

My profession had accustomed me to death; I had long ago overcome repugnance to the amphitheatre, but this was the first time that I found myself face to face with a crime.

For it was evident that an abominable crime had been committed.

Less sensitive than I, my neighbor entered with a firm step.

"Oh, it is you, Mechinet," said the police commissary; "I am very sorry to have troubled you."

"Why?"

"Because we shall not need your services. We know the guilty one; I have given orders; by this time he must have been arrested."

How strange!

From M. Mechinet's gesture one might have believed that this assurance vexed him. He pulled out his snuff-box, took two or three of his fantastic pinches, and said:

"Ah! the guilty one is known?"

It was the examining magistrate who answered:

"Yes, and known in a certain and positive manner; yes, M. Mechinet, the crime once committed, the assassin escaped, believing that his victim had ceased living. He was mistaken. Providence was watching; this unfortunate old man was still breathing. Gathering all his energy, he dipped one of his fingers in the blood which was flowing in streams from his

wound, and there, on the floor, he wrote in his blood his murderer's name. Now look for yourself."

Then I perceived what at first I had not seen.

On the inlaid floor, in large, badly shaped, but legible letters, was written in blood: MONIS.

"Well?" asked M. Mechinet.

"That," answered the police commissary, "is the beginning of the name of a nephew of the poor man; of a nephew for whom he had an affection, and whose name is Monistrol."

"The devil!" exclaimed my neighbor.

"I can not suppose," continued the investigating magistrate, "that the wretch would attempt denying. The five letters are an overwhelming accusation. Moreover, who would profit by this cowardly crime? He alone, as sole heir of this old man, who, they say, leaves a large fortune. There is more. It was last evening that the murder was committed. Well, last evening none other but his nephew called on this poor old man. The concierge saw him enter the house at about nine o'clock and leave again a little before midnight."

"It is clear," said M. Mechinet approvingly; "it is very clear, this Monistrol is nothing but an idiot." And, shrugging his shoulders, asked:

"But did he steal anything, break some piece of furniture, anything to give us an idea as to the motive for the crime?"

"Up to now nothing seems to have been disturbed," answered the commissary. "As you said, the wretch is not clever; as soon as he finds himself discovered, he will confess."

Whereupon the police commissary and M. Mechinet withdrew to the window, conversing in low tones, while the judge gave some instructions to his clerk.

III

I HAD wanted to know exactly what my enigmatic neighbor was doing. Now I knew it. Now everything was explained. The looseness of his life, his absences, his late homecomings, his sudden disappearances, his young wife's fears and

complicity; the wound I had cured. But what did I care now about that discovery?

I examined with curiosity everything around me.

From where I was standing, leaning against the door-frame, my eye took in the entire apartment.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, evidenced a scene of murder. On the contrary, everything betokened comfort, and at the same time habits parsimonious and methodical.

Everything was in its place; there was not one wrong fold in the curtains; the wood of the furniture was brilliantly polished, showing daily care.

It seemed evident that the conjectures of the examining magistrate and of the police commissary were correct, and that the poor old man had been murdered the evening before, when he was about to go to bed.

In fact, the bed was open, and on the blanket lay a shirt and a neckcloth.

On the table, at the head of the bed, I noticed a glass of sugared water, a box of safety matches, and an evening paper, the "Patrie."

On one corner of the mantelpiece a candlestick was shining brightly, a nice big, solid copper candlestick. But the candle which had illuminated the crime was burned out; the murderer had escaped without extinguishing it, and it had burned down to the end, blackening the alabaster save-all in which it was placed.

I noticed all these details at a glance, without any effort, without my will having anything to do with it. My eye had become a photographic objective; the stage of the murder had portrayed itself in my mind, as on a prepared plate, with such precision that no circumstance was lacking, and with such depth that to-day, even, I can sketch the apartment of the "little old man of Batignolles" without omitting anything, not even a cork, partly covered with green wax, which lay on the floor under the chair of the judge's clerk.

It was an extraordinary faculty, which had been bestowed upon me—my chief faculty, which as yet I had not had occasion to exercise and which all at once revealed itself to me.

I was then too agitated to analyze my impressions. I had but one obstinate, burning, irresistible desire: to get close to the body, which was lying two yards from me.

At first I struggled against the temptation. But fatality had

something to do with it. I approached. Had my presence been remembered? I do not believe it.

At any rate, nobody paid any attention to me. M. Mechinet and the police commissary were still talking near the window; the clerk was reading his report in an undertone to the investigating magistrate.

Thus nothing prevented me from carrying out my intention. And, besides, I must confess I was possessed with some kind of a fever, which rendered me insensible to exterior circumstances and absolutely isolated me. So much so that I dared to kneel close to the body, in order to see better.

Far from expecting any one to call out: "What are you doing there?" I acted slowly and deliberately, like a man who, having received a mission, executes it.

The unfortunate old man seemed to me to have been between seventy and seventy-five years old. He was small and very thin, but solid and built to pass the hundred-year mark. He still had considerable hair, yellowish white and curly, on the nape of the neck. His gray beard, strong and thick, looked as if he had not been shaven for five or six days; it must have grown after his death. This circumstance did not surprise me, as I had often noticed it with our subjects in the amphitheatres.

What did surprise me was the expression of the face. It was calm; I should even say, smiling. His lips were parted, as for a friendly greeting. Death must have occurred then with terrible suddenness to preserve such a kindly expression! That was the first idea which came to my mind.

Yes, but how reconcile these two irreconcilable circumstances: a sudden death and those five letters—MONIS—which I saw in lines of blood on the floor? In order to write them, what effort must it have cost a dying man! Only the hope of revenge could have given him so much energy. And how great must his rage have been to feel himself expiring before being able to trace the entire name of his murderer! And yet the face of the dead seemed to smile at one.

The poor old man had been struck in the throat, and the weapon had gone right through the neck. The instrument must have been a dagger, or perhaps one of those terrible Catalan knives, as broad as the hand, which cut on both sides and are as pointed as a needle.

Never in my life before had I been agitated by such strange

sensations. My temples throbbed with extraordinary violence, and my heart swelled as if it would break. What was I about to discover?

Driven by a mysterious and irresistible force, which annihilated my will-power, I took between my hands, for the purpose of examining them, the stiff and icy hands of the body.

The right hand was clean; it was one of the fingers of the left hand, the index, which was all blood-stained.

What! it was with the left hand that the old man had written? Impossible!

Seized with a kind of dizziness, with haggard eyes, my hair standing on end, paler than the dead lying at my feet, I rose with a terrible cry:

"Great God!"

At this cry all the others jumped up, surprised, frightened.

"What is it?" they asked me all together. "What has happened?"

I tried to answer, but the emotion was strangling me. All I could do was to show them the dead man's hands, stammering:

"There! There!"

Quick as lightning, M. Mechinet fell on his knees beside the body. What I had seen he saw, and my impression was also his, for, quickly rising, he said:

"It was not this poor old man who traced the letters there."

As the judge and the commissary looked at him with open mouths, he explained to them the circumstance of the left hand alone being blood-stained.

"And to think that I had not paid any attention to that," repeated the distressed commissary over and over again.

M. Mechinet was taking snuff furiously.

"So it is," he said, "the things that are not seen are those that are near enough to put the eyes out. But no matter. Now the situation is devilishly changed. Since it is not the old man himself who wrote, it must be the person who killed him."

"Evidently," approved the commissary.

"Now," continued my neighbor, "can any one imagine a murderer stupid enough to denounce himself by writing his own name beside the body of his victim? No; is it not so? Now, conclude—"

The judge had become anxious.

"It is clear," he said, "appearances have deceived us. Moni-

strol is not the guilty one. Who is it? It is your business, M. Mechinet, to discover him."

He stopped; a police officer had entered, and, addressing the commissary, said:

"Your orders have been carried out, sir. Monistrol has been arrested and locked up. He confessed everything."

IV

IT is impossible to describe our astonishment. What! While we were there, exerting ourselves to find proofs of Monistrol's innocence, he acknowledges himself guilty?

M. Mechinet was the first to recover.

Rapidly he raised his fingers from the snuff-box to his nose five or six times, and advancing toward the officer, said:

"Either you are mistaken, or you are deceiving us; one or the other."

"I'll take an oath, M. Mechinet."

"Hold your tongue. You either misunderstood what Monistrol said or got intoxicated by the hope of astonishing us with the announcement that the affair was settled."

The officer, up to then humble and respectful, now became refractory.

"Excuse me," he interrupted, "I am neither an idiot nor a liar, and I know what I am talking about."

The discussion came so near being a quarrel that the investigating judge thought best to interfere.

"Calm yourself, Monsieur Mechinet," he said, "and before expressing an opinion, wait to be informed."

Then turning toward the officer, he continued:

"And you, my friend, tell us what you know, and give us reasons for your assurance."

Thus sustained, the officer crushed M. Mechinet with an ironical glance, and with a very marked trace of conceit he began:

"Well, this is what happened: Monsieur the Judge and Monsieur the Commissary, both here present, instructed us—In-

spector Goulard, my colleague Poltin, and myself—to arrest Monistrol, dealer in imitation jewelry, living at 75 Rue Vivienne, the said Monistrol being accused of the murder of his uncle."

"Exactly so," approved the commissary in a low voice.

"Thereupon," continued the officer, "we took a cab and had him drive us to the address given. We arrived and found M. Monistrol in the back of his shop, about to sit down to dinner with his wife, a woman of twenty-five or thirty years, and very beautiful.

"Seeing the three of us stand like a string of onions, our man got up. 'What do you want?' he asked us. Sergeant Goulard drew from his pocket the warrant and answered: 'In the name of the law, I arrest you!'"

Here M. Mechinet behaved as if he were on a gridiron.

"Could you not hurry up?" he said to the officer.

But the latter, as if he had not heard, continued in the same calm tone:

"I have arrested many people during my life. Well! I never saw any of them go to pieces like this one.

"'You are joking,' he said to us, 'or you are making a mistake.'

"'No, we are not mistaken!'

"'But, after all, what do you arrest me for?'

"Goulard shrugged his shoulders.

"'Don't act like a child,' he said, 'what about your uncle? The body has been found, and we have overwhelming proofs against you.'

"Oh! that rascal, what a disagreeable shock! He tottered and finally dropped on a chair, sobbing and stammering I can not tell what answer.

"Goulard, seeing him thus, shook him by the coat collar and said:

"'Believe me, the shortest way is to confess everything.'

"The man looked at us stupidly and murmured:

"'Well, yes, I confess everything.'"

"Well maneuvred, Goulard," said the commissary approvingly.

The officer looked triumphant.

"It was now a matter of cutting short our stay in the shop," he continued. "We had been instructed to avoid all commotion, and some idlers were already crowding around. Goulard seized the prisoner by the arm, shouting to him: 'Come on, let us

start; they are waiting for us at headquarters.' Monistrol managed to get on his shaking legs, and in the voice of a man taking his courage in both hands, said: 'Let us go.'

"We were thinking that the worst was over; we did not count on the wife.

"Up to that moment she had remained in an armchair, as in a faint, without breathing a word, without seeming even to understand what was going on.

"But when she saw that we were taking away her husband, she sprang up like a lioness, and throwing herself in front of the door, shouted: 'You shall not pass.'

"On my word of honor she was superb; but Goulard, who had seen others before, said to her: 'Come, come, little woman, don't let us get angry; your husband will be brought back.'

"However, far from giving way to us, she clung more firmly to the door-frame, swearing that her husband was innocent; declaring that if he was taken to prison she would follow him, at times threatening us and crushing us with invectives, and then again entreating in her sweetest voice.

"When she understood that nothing would prevent us from doing our duty, she let go the door, and, throwing herself on her husband's neck, groaned: 'Oh, dearest beloved, is it possible that you are accused of a crime? You—you! Please tell them, these men, that you are innocent.'

"In truth, we were all affected, except the man, who pushed his poor wife back so brutally that she fell in a heap in a corner of the back shop.

"Fortunately that was the end.

"The woman had fainted; we took advantage of it to stow the husband away in the cab that had brought us.

"To stow away is the right word, because he had become like an inanimate thing; he could no longer stand up; he had to be carried. To omit nothing, I should add that his dog, a kind of black cur, wanted actually to jump into the carriage with us, and that we had the greatest trouble to get rid of it.

"On the way, as by right, Goulard tried to entertain our prisoner and to make him blab. But it was impossible to draw one word from him. It was only when we arrived at police headquarters that he seemed to come to his senses. When he was duly installed in one of the 'close confinement' cells, he threw himself headlong on the bed, repeating: 'What have I done to you, my God! What have I done to you!'

"At this moment Goulard approached him, and for the second time asked: 'Well, do you confess your guilt?' Monistrol motioned with his head: 'Yes, yes.' Then in a hoarse voice said: 'I beg you, leave me alone.'

"That is what we did, taking care, however, to place a keeper on watch at the window of the cell, in case the fellow should attempt suicide.

"Goulard and Poltin remained down there, and I, here I am."

"That is precise," grumbled the commissary; "it could not be more precise."

That was also the judge's opinion, for he murmured:

"How can we, after all this, doubt Monistrol's guilt?"

As for me, though I was confounded, my convictions were still firm. I was just about to open my mouth to venture an objection, when M. Mechinet forestalled me.

"All that is well and good," exclaimed he. "Only if we admit that Monistrol is the murderer, we are forced also to admit that it was he who wrote his name there on the floor—and—well, that's a hard nut."

"Bosh!" interrupted the commissary, "since the accused confessed, what is the use of bothering about a circumstance which will be explained at the trial?"

But my neighbor's remark had again roused perplexities in the mind of the judge, and without committing himself, he said:

"I am going to the Prefecture. I want to examine Monistrol this very evening."

And after telling the commissary to be sure and fulfil all formalities and to await the arrival of the physicians called for the autopsy of the body, he left, followed by his clerk and by the officer who had come to inform us of the successful arrest.

"Provided these devils of doctors do not keep me waiting too long," growled the commissary, who was thinking of his dinner.

Neither M. Mechinet nor I answered him. We remained standing, facing one another, evidently beset by the same thought.

"After all," murmured my neighbor, "perhaps it was the old man who wrote—"—"With the left hand, then?" Is that possible? Without considering that this poor fellow must have

died instantly."—"Are you certain of it?"—"Judging by his wound I would take an oath on it. Besides, the physicians will come; they will tell you whether I am right or wrong."

With veritable frenzy M. Mechinet pretended to take snuff.

"Perhaps there is some mystery beneath this," said he; "that remains to be seen."

"It is an examination to be gone over again."—"Be it so, let us do it over; and to begin, let us examine the concierge."

Running to the staircase, M. Mechinet leaned over the balustrade, calling: "Concierge! Hey! Concierge! Come up, please."

V

WHILE waiting for the concierge to come up, M. Mechinet proceeded with a rapid and able examination of the scene of the crime.

It was principally the lock of the main door to the apartment which attracted his attention; it was intact, and the key turned without difficulty. This circumstance absolutely discarded the thought that an evil-doer, a stranger, had entered during the night by means of false keys.

For my part, I had involuntarily, or rather inspired by the astonishing instinct which had revealed itself in me, picked up the cork, partly covered with green wax, which I had noticed on the floor.

It had been used, and on the side where the wax was showed traces of the corkscrew; but on the other end could be seen a kind of deepish notch, evidently produced by some sharp and pointed instrument.

Suspecting the importance of my discovery, I communicated it to M. Mechinet, and he could not avoid an exclamation of joy.

"At last," he exclaimed, "at last we have a clue! This cork, it's the murderer who dropped it here; he stuck in it the brittle point of the weapon he used. The conclusion is, that the instrument of the murder is a dagger with a fixed handle

and not one of those knives which shut up. With this cork, I am certain to reach the guilty one, no matter who he is!"

The police commissary was just finishing his task in the room, M. Mechinet and I had remained in the parlor, when we were interrupted by the noise of heavy breathing.

Almost immediately appeared the powerful woman I had noticed holding forth in the hall in the midst of the tenants.

It was the concierge, if possible redder than at the time of our arrival.

"In what way can I serve you, monsieur?" she asked of M. Mechinet.

"Take a seat, madame," he answered.

"But, monsieur, I have people downstairs."

"They will wait for you. I tell you to sit down."

Nonpulsed by M. Mechinet's tone, she obeyed.

Then looking straight at her with his terrible, small, gray eyes, he began:

"I need certain information, and I'm going to question you. In your interest, I advise you to answer straightforwardly. Now, first of all, what is the name of this poor fellow who was murdered?"

"His name was Pigoreau, kind sir, but he was mostly known by the name of Antenor, which he had formerly taken as more suitable to his business."

"Did he live in this house a long time?"

"The last eight years."

"Where did he reside before?"

"Rue Richelieu, where he had his store; he had been a hairdresser, and it was in that business that he made his money."

"He was then considered rich?"

"I heard him say to his niece that he would not let his throat be cut for a million."

As to this, it must have been known to the investigating magistrate, as the papers of the poor old man had been included in the inventory made.

"Now," M. Mechinet continued, "what kind of a man was this M. Pigoreau, called Antenor?"

"Oh! the cream of men, my dear, kind sir," answered the concierge. "It is true he was cantankerous, queer, as miserly as possible, but he was not proud. And so funny with all that. One could have spent whole nights listening to him, when he was in the right mood. And the number of stories he knew!

Just think, a former hairdresser, who, as he said, had dressed the hair of the most beautiful women in Paris!"

"How did he live?"

"As everybody else; as people do who have an income, you know, and who yet cling to their money."

"Can you give me some particulars?"

"Oh! As to that, I think so, since it was I who looked after his rooms, and that was no trouble at all for me, because he did almost everything himself—swept, dusted, and polished. Yes, it was his hobby. Well, every day at noon, I brought him up a cup of chocolate. He drank it; on top of that he took a large glass of water; that was his breakfast. Then he dressed and that took him until two o'clock, for he was a dandy, and careful of his person, more so than a newly married woman. As soon as he was dressed, he went out to take a walk through Paris. At six o'clock he went to dinner in a private boarding-house, the Mademoiselles Gomet, in the Rue de las Paix. After dinner he used to go to the Cafe Guerbois for his demitasse and to play his usual game, and at eleven he came home to go to bed. On the whole, the poor fellow had only one fault; he was fond of the other sex. I even told him often: 'At your age, are you not ashamed of yourself?' But no one is perfect, and after all it could be easily understood of a former perfumer, who in his life had had a great many good fortunes."

An obsequious smile strayed over the lips of the powerful concierge, but nothing could cheer up M. Mechinet.

"Did M. Pigoreau receive many calls?" he asked.

"Very few. I have hardly seen anybody call on him except his nephew, M. Monistrol, whom he invited every Sunday to dinner at Lathuile's."

"And how did they get along together, the uncle and the nephew?"

"Like two fingers of the same hand."

"Did they ever have any disputes?"

"Never, except that they were always wrangling about Madame Clara."

"Who is that Madame Clara?"

"Well, M. Monistrol's wife, a superb creature. The deceased, old Antenor, could not bear her. He said that his nephew loved that woman too much; that she was leading him by the end of his nose, and that she was fooling him in every

way. He claimed that she did not love her husband; that she was too high and mighty for her position, and that finally she would do something foolish. Madame Clara and her uncle even had a falling out at the end of last year. She wanted the good fellow to lend a hundred thousand francs to M. Monistrol, to enable him to buy out a jeweler's stock at the Palais Royal. But he refused, saying that after his death they could do with his money whatever they wanted, but that until then, since he had earned it, he intended to keep and enjoy it."

I thought that M. Mechinet would dwell on this circumstance, which seemed to me very important. But no, in vain did I increase my signals; he continued:

"It remains now to be told by whom the crime was first discovered."

"By me, my kind monsieur, by me," moaned the concierge. "Oh! it is frightful! Just imagine, this morning, exactly at twelve, I brought up to old Antenor his chocolate, as usual. As I do the cleaning, I have a key to the apartment. I opened, I entered, and what did I see? Oh! my God!"

And she began to scream loudly.

"This grief proves that you have a good heart, madame," gravely said M. Mechinet. "Only, as I am in a great hurry, please try to overcome it. What did you think, seeing your tenant murdered?"

"I said to any one who wanted to hear: 'It is his nephew, the scoundrel, who has done it to inherit.'"

"What makes you so positive? Because after all to accuse a man of so great a crime, is to drive him to the scaffold."

"But, monsieur, who else would it be? M. Monistrol came to see his uncle last evening, and when he left it was nearly midnight. Besides, he nearly always speaks to me, but never said a word to me that night, neither when he came, nor when he left. And from that moment up to the time I discovered everything, I am sure nobody went up to M. Antenor's apartment."

I admit this evidence confused me. I would not have thought of continuing the examination. Fortunately, M. Mechinet's experience was great, and he was thoroughly master of the difficult art of drawing the whole truth from witnesses.

"Then, madame," he insisted, "you are certain that Monistrol came yesterday evening?"

"I am certain."

"Did you surely see him and recognize him?"

"Ah! wait. I did not look him in the face. He passed quickly, trying to hide himself, like the scoundrel he is, and the hallway is badly illuminated."

At this reply, of such incalculable importance, I jumped up and, approaching the concierge, exclaimed:

"If it is so, how dare you affirm that you recognized M. Monistrol?"

She looked me over from head to foot, and answered with an ironical smile:

"If I did not see the master's face, I did see the dog's nose. As I always pet him, he came into my lodge, and I was just going to give him a bone from a leg of mutton when his master whistled for him."

I looked at M. Mechinet, anxious to know what he thought of this, but his face faithfully kept the secret of his impressions.

He only added:

"Of what breed is M. Monistrol's dog?"

"It is a loulou, such as the drovers used formerly, all black, with a white spot over the ear; they call him "Pluton."

M. Mechinet rose.

"You may retire," he said to the concierge; "I know all I want."

And when she had left, he remarked:

"It seems to me impossible that the nephew is not the guilty one."

During the time this long examination was taking place, the physicians had come. When they finished the autopsy they reached the following conclusion:

"M. Pigoreau's death had certainly been instantaneous." So it was not he who had lined out the five letters, MONIS, which we saw on the floor near the body.

So I was not mistaken.

"But if it was not he," exclaimed M. Mechinet, "who was it then? Monistrol—that is what nobody will ever succeed in putting into my brain."

And the commissary, happy at being free to go to dinner at last, made fun of M. Mechinet's perplexities—ridiculous perplexities, since Monistrol had confessed. But M. Mechinet said:

"Perhaps I am really nothing but an idiot; the future will tell.

In the mean time, come, by dear Monsieur Godeuil, come with me to Police Headquarters."

VI

IN like manner, as in going to Batignolles, we took a cab also to go to Police Headquarters.

M. Mechinet's preoccupation was great. His fingers continually traveled from the empty snuff-box to his nose, and I heard him grumbling between his teeth:

"I shall assure myself of the truth of this! I must find out the truth of this."

Then he took from his pocket the cork which I had given him, and turned it over and over like a monkey picking a nut, and murmured:

"This is evidence, however; there must be something gained by this green wax."

Buried in my corner, I did not breathe. My position was certainly one of the strangest, but I did not give it a thought. Whatever intelligence I had was absorbed in this affair; in my mind I went over its various and contradictory elements, and exhausted myself in trying to penetrate the secret of the tragedy, a secret of which I had a presentiment.

When our carriage stopped, it was night—dark.

The Quai des Orfevres was deserted and quiet; not a sound, not a passer-by. The stores in the neighborhood, few and far between, were closed. All the life of the district had hidden itself in the little restaurant which almost forms the corner of the Rue de Jerusalem, behind the red curtains, on which were outlined the shadows of the patrons.

"Will they let you see the accused?" I asked M. Mechinet.

"Certainly," he answered. "Am I not charged with the following up of this affair? Is it not necessary, in view of unforeseen requirements at the inquest, that I be allowed to examine the prisoner at any hour of the day or night?"

And with a quick step he entered under the arch, saying to me:

"Come, come, we have no time to lose."

I did not require any encouragement from him. I followed, agitated by indescribable emotions and trembling with vague curiosity.

It was the first time I had ever crossed the threshold of the Police Headquarters, and God knows what my prejudices were then.

There, I said to myself, not without a certain terror, there is the secret of Paris!

I was so lost in thought, that, forgetting to look where I was going, I almost fell.

The shock brought me back to a sense of the situation.

We were going along an immense passageway, with damp walls and an uneven pavement. Soon my companion entered a small room where two men were playing cards, while three or four others, stretched on cots, were smoking pipes. M. Mechinet exchanged a few words with them—I could not hear, for I had remained outside. Then he came out again, and we continued our walk.

After crossing a court and entering another passageway, we soon came before an iron gate with heavy bolts and a formidable lock.

At a word from M. Mechinet, a watchman opened this gate for us; at the right we passed a spacious room, where it seemed to me I saw policemen and Paris guards; finally we climbed up a very steep stairway.

At the top of the stairs, at the entrance to a narrow passage with a number of small doors, was seated a stout man with a jovial face, that certainly had nothing of the classical jailer about it.

As soon as he noticed my companion, he exclaimed:

"Eh! it is M. Mechinet. Upon my word, I was expecting you. I bet you came for the murderer of the little old man of Batignolles."

"Precisely. Is there anything new?"

"No."

"But the investigating judge must have come."

"He has just gone."

"Well?"

"He did not stay more than three minutes with the accused, and when he left he seemed very much satisfied. At the bottom of the stairs he met the governor, and said to him: "This

is a settled case; the murderer has not even attempted to deny."

M. Mechinet jumped about three feet; but the jailer did not notice it, and continued:

"But then, that did not surprise me. At a mere glance at the individual as they brought him I said: 'Here is one who will not know how to hold out.'"

"And what is he doing now?"

"He moans. I have been instructed to watch him, for fear he should commit suicide, and as is my duty, I do watch him, but it is mere waste of time. He is another one of those fellows who care more for their own skin than for that of others."

"Let us go and see him," interrupted M. Mechinet; "and above all, no noise."

At once all three advanced on tiptoe till we reached a solid oak door, through which had been cut a little barred window about a man's height from the ground.

Through this little window could be seen everything that occurred in the cell, which was illuminated by a paltry gas-burner.

The jailer glanced in first, M. Mechinet then looked, and at last my turn came.

On a narrow iron couch, covered with a gray woolen blanket with yellow stripes, I perceived a man lying flat, his head hidden between his partly folded arms.

He was crying; the smothered sound of his sobs reached me, and from time to time a convulsive trembling shook him from head to foot.

"Open now," ordered M. Mechinet of the watchman.

He obeyed, and we entered.

At the sound of the grating key, the prisoner had raised himself and, sitting on his pallet, his legs and arms hanging, his head inclined on his chest, he looked at us stupidly.

He was a man of thirty-five or thirty-eight years of age; his build a little above the average, but robust, with an apoplectic neck sunk between two broad shoulders. He was ugly; smallpox had disfigured him, and his long, straight nose and receding forehead gave him somewhat the stupid look of a sheep. However his blue eyes were very beautiful, and his teeth were of remarkable whiteness.

"Well! M. Monistrol," began M. Mechinet, "we are grieving, are we?"

As the unfortunate man did not answer, he continued:

"I admit that the situation is not enlivening. Nevertheless, if I were in your place, I would prove that I am a man. I would have common sense, and try to prove my innocence."

"I am not innocent."

This time there could not be any mistake, nor could the intelligence of the officer be doubted; it was from the very mouth of the accused that we gathered the terrible confession.

"What!" exclaimed M. Mechinet, "it was you who—"

The man stood up, staggering on his legs, his eyes bloodshot, his mouth foaming, prey to a veritable attack of rage.

"Yes, it was I," he interrupted; "I alone. How many times will I have to repeat it? Already, a while ago, a judge came; I confessed everything and signed my confession. What more do you ask? Go on, I know what awaits me, and I am not afraid. I killed, I must be killed! Well, cut my head off, the sooner the better."

Somewhat stunned at first, M. Mechinet soon recovered.

"One moment. You know," he said, "they do not cut people's heads off like that. First they must prove that they are guilty; after that the courts admit certain errors, certain fatalities, if you will, and it is for this very reason that they recognize 'extenuating circumstances.'"

An inarticulate moan was Monistrol's only answer. M. Mechinet continued:

"Did you have a terrible grudge against your uncle?"

"Oh, no."

"Then why?"

"To inherit; my affairs were in bad shape—you may make inquiry. I needed money; my uncle, who was very rich, refused me some."

"I understand; you hoped to escape from justice?"

"I was hoping to."

Until then I had been surprised at the way M. Mechinet was conducting this rapid examination, but now it became clear to me. I guessed rightly what followed; I saw what trap he was laying for the accused.

"Another thing," he continued suddenly, "where did you buy the revolver you used in committing the murder?"

No surprise appeared on Monistrol's face.

"I had it in my possession for a long time," he answered.

"What did you do with it after the crime?"

"I threw it outside on the boulevard."

"All right," spoke M. Mechinet gravely, "we will make search and will surely find it."

After a moment of silence he added:

"What I can not explain to myself is, why is it that you had your dog follow you?"

"What! How! My dog?"

"Yes, Pluton. The concierge recognized him."

Monistrol's fists moved convulsively; he opened his mouth as if to answer, but a sudden idea crossing his mind, he threw himself back on his bed, and said in a tone of firm determination:

"You have tortured me enough; you shall not draw another word from me."

It was clear that to insist would be taking trouble for nothing.

We then withdrew.

Once outside on the quay, grasping M. Mechinet's arm, I said:

"You heard it, that unfortunate man does not even know how his uncle died. Is it possible to still doubt his innocence?"

But he was a terrible skeptic, that old detective.

"Who knows?" he answered. "I have seen some famous actors in my life. But we have had enough of it for to-day. This evening I will take you to eat soup with me. To-morrow it will be daylight, and we shall see."

VII

IT was not far from ten o'clock when M. Mechinet, whom I was still accompanying, rang at the door of his apartment.

"I never carry any latch-key," he told me. "In our blessed business you can never know what may happen. There are many rascals who have a grudge against me, and even if I am not always careful for myself, I must be so for my wife."

My worthy neighbor's explanation was superfluous. I had understood. I even observed that he rang in a peculiar way,

which must have been an agreed signal between his wife and himself.

It was the amiable Madame Mechinet who opened the door.

With a quick movement, as graceful as a kitten, she threw herself on her husband's neck, exclaiming:

"Here you are at last! I do not know why, but I was almost worried."

But she stopped suddenly; she had just noticed me. Her joyous expression darkened, and she drew back. Addressing both me and her husband:

"What!" she continued, "you come from the cafe at this hour? That is not common sense!"

M. Mechinet's lips wore the indulgent smile of the man who is sure of being loved, who knows how to appease by a word the quarrel picked with him.

"Do not scold us, Caroline," he answered; by this "us" associating me with his case. "We do not come from the cafe, and neither have we lost our time. They sent for me for an affair; for a murder committed at Batignolles."

With a suspicious look the young woman examined us—first her husband and then me; when she had persuaded herself that she was not being deceived, she said only:

"Ah!"

But it would take a whole page to give an inventory of all that was contained in that brief exclamation.

It was addressed to M. Mechinet, and clearly signified:

"What? you confided in this young man! You have revealed to him your position; you have initiated him into our secrets?"

Thus I interpreted that eloquent "Ah!" My worthy neighbor, too, must have interpreted it as I did, for he answered:

"Well, yes. Where is the wrong of it? I may have to dread the vengeance of wretches whom I give up to justice, but what have I to fear from honest people? Do you imagine perhaps that I hide myself; that I am ashamed of my trade?"

"You misunderstood me, my friend," objected the young woman.

M. Mechinet did not even hear her.

He had just mounted—I learned this detail later—on a favorite hobby that always carried the day.

"Upon my word," he continued, "you have some peculiar ideas, madame, my wife. What! I one of the sentinels of civilization! I, who assure society's safety at the price of

my rest and at the risk of my life, and should I blush for it? That would be far too amusing. You will tell me that against us of the police there exist a number of absurd prejudices left behind by the past. What do I care? Yes, I know that there are some sensitive gentlemen who look down on us. But sacrebleau! How I should like to see their faces if tomorrow my colleagues and I should go on a strike, leaving the streets free to the army of rascals whom we hold in check."

Accustomed without doubt to explosions of this kind, Madame Mechinet did not say a word; she was right in doing so, for my good neighbor, meeting with no contradiction, calmed himself as if by magic.

"But enough of this," he said to his wife. "There is now a matter of far greater importance. We have not had any dinner yet; we are dying of hunger; have you anything to give us for supper?"

What happened that night must have happened too often for Madame Mechinet to be caught unprepared.

"In five minutes you gentlemen will be served," she answered with the most amiable smile.

In fact, a moment afterward we sat down at table before a fine cut of cold beef, served by Madame Mechinet, who did not stop filling our glasses with excellent Macon wine.

And while my worthy neighbor was conscientiously plying his fork I, looking at that peaceable home, which was his, that pretty, attentive little wife, which was his, kept asking myself whether I really saw before me one of those "savage" police agents who have been the heroes of so many absurd stories.

However, hunger soon satisfied, M. Mechinet started to tell his wife about our expedition. And he did not tell her about it lightly, but with the most minute details. She had taken a seat beside him, and by the way she listened and looked understandingly, asking for explanations when she had not well understood, one could recognize in her a plain "Egeria," accustomed to be consulted, and having a deliberative vote.

When M. Mechinet had finished, she said to him:

"You have made a great mistake, an irreparable mistake."

"Where?"

"It is not to Police Headquarters you should have gone, abandoning Batignolles."

"But Monistrol?"

"Yes, you wanted to examine him. What advantage did you get from that?"

"It was of use to me, my dear friend."

"For nothing. It was to the Rue Vivienne that you should have hurried, to the wife. You would have surprised her in a natural agitation caused by her husband's arrest, and if she is his accomplice, as we must suppose, with a little skill you would have made her confess."

At these words I jumped from my chair.

"What! madame," I exclaimed, "do you believe Monistrol guilty?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answered:

"Yes."

Then she added very vivaciously:

"But I am sure, do you hear, absolutely sure, that the murder was conceived by the woman. Of twenty crimes committed by men, fifteen have been conceived, planned and inspired by woman. Ask Mechinet. The concierge's deposition ought to have enlightened you. Who is that Madame Monistrol? They told you a remarkably beautiful person, coquettish, ambitious, affected with covetousness, and who was leading her husband by the end of his nose. Now what was her position? Wretched, tight, precarious. She suffered from it, and the proof of it is that she asked her uncle to loan her husband a hundred thousand francs. He refused them to her, thus shattering her hopes. Do you not think she had a deadly grudge against him? And when she kept seeing him in good health and sturdy as an oak, she must have said to herself fatally: 'He will live a hundred years; by the time he leaves us his inheritance we won't have any teeth left to munch it, and who knows even whether *he* will not bury *us!*' Is it so very far from this point to the conception of a crime? And the resolution once taken in her mind, she must have prepared her husband a long time before, she must have accustomed him to the thought of murder, she must have put, so to say, the knife in his hand. And he, one day, threatened with bankruptcy, crazed by his wife's lamentations, delivered the blow."

"All that is logical," approved M. Mechinet, "very logical, without a doubt, but what becomes of the circumstances brought to light by us?"

"Then, madame," I said, "you believe Monistrol stupid enough to denounce himself by writing down his name?"

She slightly shrugged her shoulders and answered:

"Is that stupidity? As for me, I maintain that it is not. Is not that point your strongest argument in favor of his innocence?"

This reasoning was so specious that for a moment I remained perplexed. Then recovering, I said, insisting:

"But he confesses his guilt, madame?"

"An excellent method of his for getting the authorities to prove him innocent."

"Oh!"

"You yourself are proof of its efficacy, dear M. Godeuil."

"Eh! madame, the unfortunate does not even know how his uncle was killed!"

"I beg your pardon; he *seemed* not to know it, which is not the same thing."

The discussion was becoming animated, and would have lasted much longer, had not M. Mechinet put an end to it.

"Come, come," he simply said to his wife, "you are too romantic this evening."

And addressing me, he continued:

"As for you, I shall come and get you to-morrow, and we shall go together to call on Madame Monistrol. And now, as I am dying for sleep, good night."

He may have slept. As for me, I could not close my eyes.

A secret voice within me seemed to say that Monistrol was innocent.

My imagination painted with painful liveliness the tortures of that unfortunate man, alone in his prison cell.

But why had he confessed?

VIII

WHAT I then lacked—I have had occasion to realize it hundreds of times since—was experience, business practise, and chiefly an exact knowledge of the means of action and of police investigation.

I felt vaguely that this particular investigation had been

conducted wrongly, or rather superficially, but I would have been embarrassed to say why, and especially to say what should have been done.

None the less I was passionately interested in Monistrol.

It seemed to me that his cause was also mine, and it was only natural—my young vanity was at stake. Was it not one of my own remarks that had raised the first doubts as to the guilt of this unfortunate man?

I owed it to myself, I said, to prove his innocence.

Unfortunately the discussions of the evening troubled me to such an extent that I did not know precisely on which fact to build up my system.

And, as always happens when the mind is for too long a time applied to the solution of a problem, my thoughts became tangled, like a skein in the hands of a child; I could no longer see clearly; it was chaos.

Buried in my armchair, I was torturing my brain, when, at about nine o'clock in the morning, M. Mechinet, faithful to his promise of the evening before, came for me.

"Come, let us go," he said, shaking me suddenly, for I had not heard him enter. "Let us start!"

"I am with you," I said, getting up.

We descended hurriedly, and I noticed then that my worthy neighbor was more carefully dressed than usual.

He had succeeded in giving himself that easy and well-to-do appearance which more than anything else impresses the Parisian shopkeeper.

His cheerfulness was that of a man sure of himself, marching toward certain victory.

We were soon in the street, and while walking he asked me:

"Well, what do you think of my wife? I pass for a clever man at police headquarters, and yet I consult her—even Moliere consulted his maid—and often I find it to my advantage. She has one weakness: for her, unreasonable crimes do not exist, and her imagination endows all scoundrels with diabolical plots. But as I have exactly the opposite fault, as I perhaps am a little too much matter-of-fact, it rarely happens that from our consultation the truth does not result somehow."

"What!" I exclaimed, "you think to have solved the mystery of the Monistrol case!"

He stopped short, drew out his snuff-box, inhaled three or

four of his imaginary pinches, and in a tone of quiet vanity, answered:

"I have at least the means of solving it."

In the mean time we reached the upper end of the Rue Vivienne, not far from Monistrol's business place.

"Now look out," said M. Mechinet to me. "Follow me, and whatever happens do not be surprised."

He did well to warn me. Without the warning I would have been surprised at seeing him suddenly enter the store of an umbrella dealer.

Stiff and grave, like an Englishman, he made them show him everything there was in the shop, found nothing suitable, and finally inquired whether it was not possible for them to manufacture for him an umbrella according to a model which he would furnish.

They answered that it would be the easiest thing in the world, and he left, saying he would return the day following.

And most assuredly the half hour he spent in this store was not wasted.

While examining the objects submitted to him, he had artfully drawn from the dealers all they knew about the Monistrol couple.

Upon the whole, it was not a difficult task, as the affair of the "little old man of Batignolles" and the arrest of the imitation jeweler had deeply stirred the district and were the subject of all conversation.

"There, you see," he said to me, when we were outside, "how exact information is obtained. As soon as the people know with whom they are dealing, they pose, make long phrases, and then good-by to strict truth."

This comedy was repeated by Mr. Mechinet in seven or eight stores of the neighborhood.

In one of them, where the proprietors were disagreeable and not much inclined to talk, he even made a purchase amounting to twenty francs.

But after two hours of such practise, which amused me very much, we had gaged public opinion. We knew exactly what was thought of M. and Mme. Monistrol in the neighborhood, where they had lived since their marriage, that is, for the past four years.

As regards the husband, there was but one opinion—he was the most gentle and best of men, obliging, honest, intelligent,

and hardworking. If he had not made a success in his business it was because luck does not always favor those who most deserve it. He did wrong in taking a shop doomed to bankruptcy, for, in the past fifteen years, four merchants had failed there.

Everybody knew and said that he adored his wife, but this great love had not exceeded the proper limits, and therefore no ridicule resulted for him.

Nobody could believe in his guilt.

His arrest, they said, must be a mistake made by the police.

As to Madame Monistrol, opinion was divided.

Some thought she was too stylish for her means; others claimed that a stylish dress was one of the requirements, one of the necessities, of a business dealing in luxuries.

In general, they were convinced that she loved her husband very much. For instance, they were unanimous in praising her modesty, the more meritorious, because she was remarkably beautiful, and because she was besieged by many admirers. But never had she given any occasion to be talked about, never had her immaculate reputation been glanced at by the lightest suspicion.

I noticed that this especially bewildered M. Mechinet.

"It is surprising," he said to me, "not one scandal, not one slander, not one calumny. Oh! this is not what Caroline thought. According to her, we were to find one of those lady shopkeepers, who occupy the principal place in the office, who display their beauty much more than their merchandise, and who banish to the back shop their husband—a blind idiot, or an indecent obliging scoundrel. But not at all."

I did not answer; I was not less disconcerted than my neighbor.

We were now far from the evidence the concierge of the Rue le Cluse had given; so greatly varies the point of view according to the location. What at Batignolles is considered to be a blamable coquetry, is in the Rue Vivienne nothing more than an unreasonable requirement of position.

But we had already employed too much time for our investigations to stop and exchange impressions and to discuss our conjectures.

"Now," said M. Mechinet, "before entering the place, let us study its approaches."

And trained in carrying out discreet investigations in the

midst of Paris bustle, he motioned to me to follow him under a carriage entrance, exactly opposite Monistrol's store.

It was a modest shop, almost poor, compared with those around it. The front needed badly a painter's brush. Above, in letters which were formerly gilt, now smoky and blackened, Monistrol's name was displayed. On the plate-glass windows could be read: "Gold and Imitation."

Alas! it was principally imitation that was glistening in the show window. On the rods were hanging many plated chains, sets of jet jewelry, diadems studded with rhinestones, then imitation coral necklaces and brooches and rings; and cuff buttons set with imitation stones in all colors.

All in all, a poor display, it could never tempt gimlet thieves.

"Let us enter," I said to M. Mechinet.

He was less impatient than I, or knew better how to keep back his impatience, for he stopped me by the arm, saying:

"One moment. I should like at least to catch a glimpse of Madame Monistrol."

In vain did we continue to stand for more than twenty minutes on our observation post; the shop remained empty, Madame Monistrol did not appear.

"Come, Monsieur Godeuil, let us venture," exclaimed my worthy neighbor at last, "we have been standing in one place long enough."

IX

IN order to reach Monistrol's store we had only to cross the street.

At the noise of the door opening, a little servant girl, from fifteen to sixteen years old, dirty and ill combed, came out of the back shop.

"What can I serve the gentlemen with?" she asked.

"Madame Monistrol?"

"She is there, gentlemen; I am going to notify her, because you see—"

M. Mechinet did not give her time to finish. With a move-

ment, rather brutal, I must confess, he pushed her out of the way and entered the back shop saying:

"All right, since she is there, I am going to speak to her."

As for me, I walked on the heels of my worthy neighbor, convinced that we would not leave without knowing the solution of the riddle.

That back shop was a miserable room, serving at the same time as parlor, dining-room, and bedroom. Disorder reigned supreme; moreover there was that incoherence we notice in the house of the poor who endeavor to appear rich.

In the back there was a bed with blue damask curtains and with pillows adorned with lace; in front of the mantelpiece stood a table all covered with the remains of a more than modest breakfast.

In a large armchair was seated, or rather lying, a very blond young woman, who was holding in her hand a sheet of stamped paper.

It was Madame Monistrol.

Surely in telling us of her beauty, all the neighbors had come far below the reality. I was dazzled.

Only one circumstance displeased me. She was in full mourning, and wore a crape dress, slightly decollete, which fitted her marvelously.

This showed too much presence of mind for so great a sorrow. Her attire seemed to me to be the contrivance of an actress dressing herself for the role she is to play.

As we entered, she stood up, like a frightened doe, and with a voice which seemed to be broken by tears, she asked:

"What do you want, gentlemen?"

M. Mechinet had also observed what I had noticed.

"Madame," he answered roughly, "I was sent by the Court; I am a police agent."

Hearing this, she fell back into her armchair with a moan that would have touched a tiger.

Then, all at once, seized by some kind of enthusiasm, with sparkling eyes and trembling lips, she exclaimed:

"So you have come to arrest me. God bless you. See! I am ready, take me. Thus I shall rejoin that honest man, arrested by you last evening. Whatever be his fate, I want to share it. He is as innocent as I am. No matter! If he is to be the victim of an error of human justice, it shall be for me a last joy to die with him."

She was interrupted by a low growl coming from one of the corners of the back shop.

I looked, and saw a black dog, with bristling hair and blood-shot eyes, showing his teeth, and ready to jump on us.

"Be quiet, Pluton!" called Madame Monistrol; "go and lie down; these gentlemen do not want to hurt me."

Slowly and without ceasing to glare at us furiously, the dog took refuge under the bed.

"You are right to say that we do not want to hurt you, madame," continued M. Mechinet, "we did not come to arrest you."

If she heard, she did not show it.

"This morning already," she said, "I received this paper here, commanding me to appear later in the day, at three o'clock, at the court-house, in the office of the investigating judge. What do they want of me? my God! What do they want of me?"

"To obtain explanations which will prove, I hope, your husband's innocence. So, madame, do not consider me an enemy. What I want is to get at the truth."

He produced his snuff-box, hastily poked his fingers therein, and in a solemn tone, which I did not recognize in him, he resumed:

"It is to tell you, madame, of what importance will be your answers to the questions which I shall have the honor of asking you. Will it be convenient for you to answer me frankly?"

For a long time she rested her large blue eyes, drowned in tears, on my worthy neighbor, and in a tone of painful resignation she said:

"Question me, monsieur."

For the third time I repeat it, I was absolutely without experience; I was troubled over the manner in which M. Mechinet had begun this examination.

It seemed to me that he betrayed his perplexity, and that, instead of pursuing an aim established in advance, he was delivering his blows at random.

Ah! if I were allowed to act! Ah! if I had dared.

He, impenetrable, had seated himself opposite Madame Monistrol.

"You must know, madame," he began, "that it was the night before last, at eleven o'clock, that M. Pigoreau, called Antenor, your husband's uncle, was murdered."

"Alas!"

"Where was M. Monistrol at that hour?"

"My God! that is fatality."

M. Mechinet did not wince.

"I am asking you, madame," he insisted, "where your husband spent the evening of the day before yesterday?"

The young woman needed time to answer, because she sobbed so that it seemed to choke her. Finally mastering herself, she moaned:

"The day before yesterday my husband spent the evening out of the house."

"Do you know where he was?"

"Oh! as to that, yes. One of our workmen, who lives in Montrouge, had to deliver for us a set of false pearls, and did not deliver it. We were taking the risk of being obliged to keep the order on our account, which would have been a disaster, as we are not rich. That is why, at dinner, my husband told me: 'I am going to see that fellow.' And, in fact, toward nine o'clock, he went out, and I even went with him as far as the omnibus, where he got in in my presence, Rue Richelieu."

I was breathing more easily. This, perhaps, was an alibi after all.

M. Mechinet had the same thought, and, more gently, he resumed:

"If it is so, your workman will be able to affirm that he saw M. Monistrol at his house at eleven o'clock."

"Alas! no."

"How? Why?"

"Because he had gone out. My husband did not see him."

"That is indeed fatal. But it may be that the concierge noticed M. Monistrol."

"Our workman lives in a house where there is no concierge."

That may have been the truth; it was certainly a terrible charge against the unfortunate prisoner.

"And at what time did your husband return?" continued M. Mechinet.

"A little after midnight."

"Did you not find that he was absent a very long time?"

"Oh! yes. And I even reproved him for it. He told me as an excuse that he had taken the longest way, that he had sauntered on the road, and that he had stopped in a cafe to drink a glass of beer."

"How did he look when he came home?"

"It seemed to me that he was vexed; but that was natural."

"What clothes did he wear?"

"The same he had on when he was arrested."

"You did not observe in him anything out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing."

Standing a little behind M. Mechinet, I could, at my leisure, observe Madame Monistrol's face and catch the most fleeting signs of her emotion.

She seemed overwhelmed by an immense grief, large tears rolled down her pale cheeks; nevertheless, it seemed to me at times that I could discover in the depth of her large blue eyes something like a flash of joy.

Is it possible that she is guilty? And as this thought, which had already come to me before, presented itself more obstinately, I quickly stepped forward, and in a rough tone asked her:

"But you, madame, where were you on that fatal evening at the time your husband went uselessly to Montrouge, to look for his workman?"

She cast on me a long look, full of stupor, and softly answered:

"I was here, monsieur; witnesses will confirm it to you."

"Witnesses!"

"Yes, monsieur. It was so hot that evening that I had a longing for ice-cream, but it vexed me to eat it alone. So I sent my maid to invite my neighbors, Madame Dorstrich, the bootmaker's wife, whose store is next to ours, and Madame Rivaille, the glove manufacturer, opposite us. These two ladies accepted my invitation and remained here until half-past eleven. Ask them, they will tell you. In the midst of such cruel trials that I am suffering, this accidental circumstance is a blessing from God."

Was it really an accidental circumstance?

That is what we were asking ourselves, M. Mechinet and I, with glances more rapid than a flash.

When chance is so intelligent as that, when it serves a cause so directly, it is very hard not to suspect that it had been somewhat prepared and led on.

But the moment was badly chosen for this discovery of our bottom thoughts.

"You have never been suspected, you, madame," imprudently stated M. Mechinet. "The worst that may be supposed is that your husband perhaps told you something of the crime before he committed it."

"Monsieur—if you knew us."

"Wait. Your business is not going very well, we were told; you were embarrassed."

"Momentarily, yes; in fact—"

"Your husband must have been unhappy and worried about this precarious condition. He must have suffered especially for you, whom he adores; for you who are so young and beautiful; for you, more than for himself, he must have ardently desired the enjoyments of luxury and the satisfactions of self-esteem, procured by wealth."

"Monsieur, I repeat it, my husband is innocent."

With an air of reflection, M. Mechinet seemed to fill his nose with tobacco; then all at once he said:

"Then, by thunder! how do you explain his confessions? An innocent man does not declare himself to be guilty at the mere mentioning of the crime of which he is suspected; that is rare, madame; that is prodigious!"

A fugitive blush appeared on the cheeks of the young woman. Up to then her look had been straight and clear; now for the first time it became troubled and unsteady.

"I suppose," she answered in an indistinct voice and with increased tears, "I believe that my husband, seized by fright and stupor at finding himself accused of so great a crime, lost his head."

M. Mechinet shook his head.

"If absolutely necessary," he said, "a passing delirium might be admitted; but this morning, after a whole long night of reflection, M. Monistrol persists in his first confessions."

Was this true? Was my worthy neighbor talking at random, or else had he before coming to get me been at the prison to get news?

However it was, the young woman seemed almost to faint; hiding her head between her hands, she murmured:

"Lord God! My poor husband has become insane."

Convinced now that I was assisting at a comedy, and that the great despair of this young woman was nothing but falsehood, I was asking myself whether for certain reasons which were escaping me she had not shaped the terrible determination taken by her husband; and whether, he being innocent, she did not know the real guilty one.

But M. Mechinet did not have the air of a man looking so far ahead.

After having given the young woman a few words of consolation too common to compromise him in any way, he gave her to understand that she would forestall many prejudices by allowing a minute and strict search through her domicile.

This opening she seized with an eagerness which was not feigned.

"Search, gentlemen!" she told us; "examine, search everywhere. It is a service which you will render me. And it will not take long. We have in our name nothing but the back-shop where we are, our maid's room on the sixth floor, and a little cellar. Here are the keys for everything."

To my great surprise, M. Mechinet accepted; he seemed to be starting on one of the most exact and painstaking investigations.

What was his object? It was not possible that he did not have in view some secret aim, as his researches evidently had to end in nothing.

As soon as he had apparently finished he said:

"There remains the cellar to be explored."

"I am going to take you down, monsieur," said Madame Monistrol.

And immediately taking a burning candle, she made us cross a yard into which a door led from the back-shop, and took us across a very slippery stairway to a door which she opened, saying:

"Here it is—enter, gentlemen."

I began to understand.

My worthy neighbor examined the cellar with a ready and trained look. It was miserably kept, and more miserably fitted out. In one corner was standing a small barrel of beer, and immediately opposite, fastened on blocks, was a barrel of wine, with a wooden tap to draw it. On the right side, on iron rods, were lined up about fifty filled bottles. These bottles M. Mechinet did not lose sight of, and found occasion to move them one by one.

And what I saw he noticed: not one of them was sealed with green wax.

Thus the cork picked up by me, and which served to protect the point of the murderer's weapon, did not come from the Monistrols' cellar.

"Decidedly," M. Mechinet said, affecting some disappointment, "I do not find anything; we can go up again."

We did so, but not in the same order in which we descended, for in returning I was the first.

Thus it was I who opened the door of the back-shop. Immediately the dog of the Monistrol couple sprang at me, barking so furiously that I jumped back.

"The devil! Your dog is vicious," M. Mechinet said to the young woman.

She had already called him off with a gesture of her hand.

"Certainly not, he is not vicious," she said, "but he is a good watchdog. We are jewelers, exposed more than others to thieves; we have trained him."

Involuntarily, as one always does after having been threatened by a dog, I called him by his name, which I knew:

"Pluton! Pluton!"

But instead of coming near me, he retreated growling, showing his sharp teeth.

"Oh, it is useless for you to call him," thoughtlessly said Madame Monistrol. "He will not obey you."

"Indeed! And why?"

"Ah! because he is faithful, as all of his breed; he knows only his master and me."

This sentence apparently did not mean anything. For me it was like a flash of light. And without reflecting I asked:

"Where then, madame, was that faithful dog the evening of the crime?"

The effect produced on her by this direct question was such that she almost dropped the candlestick she was still holding.

"I do not know," she stammered; "I do not remember."

"Perhaps he followed your husband."

"In fact, yes, it seems to me now I remember."

"He must then have been trained to follow carriages, since you told us that you went with your husband as far as the Omnibus."

She remained silent, and I was going to continue when M. Mechinet interrupted me. Far from taking advantage of the young woman's troubled condition, he seemed to assume the task of reassuring her, and after having urged her to obey the summons of the investigating judge, he led me out.

Then when we were outside he said:

"Are you losing your head?"

The reproach hurt me.

"Is it losing one's head," I said, "to find the solution of the

problem? Now I have it, that solution. Monistrol's dog shall guide us to the truth."

My hastiness made my worthy neighbor smile, and in a fatherly tone he said to me:

"You are right, and I have well understood you. Only if Madame Monistrol has penetrated into your suspicions, the dog before this evening will be dead or will have disappeared."

X

I HAD committed an enormous imprudence, it was true. Nevertheless, I had found the weak point; that point by which the most solid system of defense may be broken down.

I, voluntary recruit, had seen clearly where the old stager was losing himself, groping about. Any other would, perhaps, have been jealous and would have had a grudge against me. But not he.

He did not think of anything else but of profiting by my fortunate discovery; and, as he said, everything was easy enough now, since the investigation rested on a positive point of departure.

We entered a neighboring restaurant to deliberate while lunching.

The problem, which an hour before seemed unsolvable, now stood as follows:

It had been proved to us, as much as could be by evidence, that Monistrol was innocent. Why had he confessed to being guilty? We thought we could guess why, but that was not the question of the moment. We were equally certain that Madame Monistrol had not budged from her home the night of the murder. But everything tended to show that she was morally an accomplice to the crime; that she had known of it, even if she did not advise and prepare it, and that, on the other hand, she knew the murderer very well.

Who was he, that murderer?

A man whom Monistrol's dog obeyed as well as his master, since he had him follow him when he went to the Batignolles.

Therefore, it was an intimate friend of the Monistrol household. He must have hated the husband, however, since he had arranged everything with an infernal skill, so that the suspicion of the crime should fall on that unfortunate.

On the other hand, he must have been very dear to the woman, since, knowing him, she did not give him up, and without hesitation sacrificed to him her husband.

Well!

Oh! my God! The conclusion was all in a definite shape. The murderer could only be a miserable hypocrite, who had taken advantage of the husband's affection and confidence to take possession of the wife.

In short, Madame Monistrol, belieing her reputation, certainly had a lover, and that lover necessarily was the culprit.

All filled by this certitude, I was torturing my mind to think of some infallible stratagem which would lead us to this wretch.

"And this," I said to M. Mechinet, "is how I think we ought to operate. Madame Monistrol and the murderer must have agreed that after the crime they would not see each other for some time; this is the most elementary prudence. But you may believe that it will not be long before impatience will conquer the woman, and that she will want to see her accomplice. Now place near her an observer who will follow her everywhere, and before twice forty-eight hours have passed the affair will be settled."

Furiously fumbling after his empty snuff-box, M. Mechinet remained a moment without answering, mumbling between his teeth I know not what unintelligible words.

Then suddenly, leaning toward me, he said:

"That isn't it. You have the professional genius, that is certain, but it is practise that you lack. Fortunately, I am here. What! a phrase regarding the crime puts you on the trail, and you do not follow it."

"How is that?"

"That faithful dog must be made use of."

"I do not quite catch on."

"Then know how to wait. Madame Monistrol will go out at about two o'clock, in order to be at the court-house at three; the little maid will be alone in the shop. You will see. I only tell you that."

I insisted in vain; he did not want to say anything more, taking revenge for his defeat by this innocent spite. Willing

or unwilling, I had to follow him to the nearest cafe, where he forced me to play dominoes.

Preoccupied as I was, I played badly, and he, without shame, was taking advantage of it to beat me, when the clock struck two.

"Up, men of the post," he said to me, letting go of his dice.

He paid, we went out, and a moment later we were again on duty under the carriage entrance from which we had before studied the front of the Monistrol store.

We had not been there ten minutes, when Madame Monistrol appeared in the door of her shop, dressed in black, with a long crape veil, like a widow.

"A pretty dress to go to an examination," mumbled M. Mechinet.

She gave a few instructions to her little maid, and soon left.

My companion patiently waited for five long minutes, and when he thought the young woman was already far away, he said to me:

"It is time."

And for the second time we entered the jewelry store.

The little maid was there alone, sitting in the office, for pastime nibbling some pieces of sugar stolen from her mistress.

As soon as we appeared she recognized us, and reddening and somewhat frightened, she stood up. But without giving her time to open her mouth, M. Mechinet asked:

"Where is Madame Monistrol?"

"Gone out, monsieur."

"You are deceiving me. She is there in the back shop."

"I swear to you, gentlemen, that she is not. Look in, please."

With the most disappointed looks, M. Mechinet was striking his forehead, repeating:

"How disagreeable. My God! how distressed that poor Madame Monistrol will be." And as the little maid was looking at him with her mouth wide open and with big, astonished eyes, he continued:

"But, in fact, you, my pretty girl, you can perhaps take the place of your mistress. I came back because I lost the address of the gentleman on whom she asked me to call."

"What gentleman?"

"You know. Monsieur—well, I have forgotten his name now. Monsieur—upon my word! you know, only him—that gentleman whom your devilish dog obeys so well."

"Oh! M. Victor?"

"That's just it. What is that gentleman doing?"

"He is a jeweler's workman; he is a great friend of monsieur; they were working together when monsieur was a jeweler's workman, before becoming proprietor, and that is why he can do anything he wants with Pluton."

"Then you can tell me where this M. Victor resides?"

"Certainly. He lives in the Rue du Roi-Dore, No. 23."

She seemed so happy, the poor girl, to be so well informed; but as for me, I suffered in hearing her so unwittingly denounce her mistress.

M. Mechinet, more hardened, did not have any such scruples. And even after we had obtained our information, he ended the scene with a sad joke.

As I opened the door for us to go out, he said to the young girl:

"Thanks to you. You have just rendered a great service to Madame Monistrol, and she will be very pleased."

XI

AS soon as I was on the sidewalk I had but one thought: and that was to shake out our legs and to run to the Rue du Roi-Dore and arrest this Victor, evidently the real culprit.

One word from M. Mechinet fell on my enthusiasm like a shower-bath.

"And the court," he said to me. "Without a warrant by the investigating judge I can not do anything. It is to the court-house that we must run."

"But we shall meet there Madame Monistrol, and if she sees us she will have her accomplice warned."

"Be it so," answered M. Mechinet, with a badly disguised bitterness. "Be it so, the culprit will escape and formality will have been saved. However, I shall prevent that danger. Let us walk, let us walk faster."

And, in fact, the hope of success gave him deer legs. Reaching the court-house, he jumped, four steps at a time, up the

steep stairway leading to the floor on which were the judges of investigation, and, addressing the chief bailiff, he inquired whether the magistrate in charge of the case of the "little old man of Batignolles" was in his room.

"He is there," answered the bailiff, "with a witness, a young lady in black."

"It is she!" said my companion to me. Then to the bailiff: "You know me," he continued. "Quick, give me something to write on, a few words which you will take to the judge."

The bailiff went off with the note, dragging his boots along the dusty floor, and was not long in returning with the announcement that the judge was awaiting us in No. 9.

In order to see M. Mechinet, the magistrate had left Madame Monistrol in his office, under his clerk's guard, and had borrowed the room of one of his colleagues.

"What has happened?" he asked in a tone which enabled me to measure the abyss separating a judge from a poor detective.

Briefly and clearly M. Mechinet described the steps taken by us, their results and our hopes.

Must we say it? The magistrate did not at all seem to share our convictions.

"But since Monistrol confesses," he repeated with an obstinacy which was exasperating to me.

However, after many explanations, he said:

"At any rate, I am going to sign a warrant."

The valuable paper once in his possession, M. Mechinet escaped so quickly that I nearly fell in precipitating myself after him down the stairs. I do not know whether it took us a quarter of an hour to reach the Rue du Roi-Dore. But once there: "Attention," said M. Mechinet to me.

And it was with the most composed air that he entered in the narrow passageway of the house bearing No. 23.

"M. Victor?" he asked of the concierge.

"On the fourth floor, the right-hand door in the hallway."

"Is he at home?"

"Yes."

M. Mechinet took a step toward the staircase, but seemed to change his mind, and said to the concierge:

"I must make a present of a good bottle of wine to that dear Victor. With which wine-merchant does he deal in this neighborhood?"

"With the one opposite."

We were there in a trice, and in the tone of a customer M. Mechinet ordered:

"One bottle, please, and of good wine—of that with the green seal."

Ah! upon my word! That thought would never have come to me at that time. And yet it was very simple.

When the bottle was brought, my companion exhibited the cork found at the home of M. Pigoreau, called Antenor, and we easily identified the wax.

To our moral certainty was now added a material certainty, and with a firm hand M. Mechinet knocked at Victor's door.

"Come in," cried a pleasant-sounding voice.

The key was in the door; we entered, and in a very neat room I perceived a man of about thirty, slender, pale, and blond, who was working in front of a bench.

Our presence did not seem to trouble him.

"What do you want?" he politely asked.

M. Mechinet advanced toward him, and, taking him by the arm, said:

"In the name of the law, I arrest you."

The man became livid, but did not lower his eyes.

"Are you making fun of me?" he said with an insolent air. "What have I done?"

M. Mechinet shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not act like a child," he answered; "your account is settled. You were seen coming out from old man Antenor's home, and in my pocket I have a cork which you made use of to prevent your dagger from losing its point."

It was like a blow of a fist in the neck of the wretch. Overwhelmed, he dropped on his chair, stammering:

"I am innocent."

"You will tell that to the judge," said M. Mechinet good-naturedly; "but I am afraid that he will not believe you. Your accomplice, the Monistrol woman, has confessed everything."

As if moved by a spring, Victor jumped up.

"That is impossible!" he exclaimed. "She did not know anything about it."

"Then you did the business all alone? Very well. There is at least that much confessed."

Then addressing me in a tone of a man knowing what he is talking about, M. Mechinet continued:

"Will you please look in the drawers, my dear Monsieur

Godeuil; you will probably find there the dagger of this pretty fellow, and certainly also the love-letters and the picture of his sweetheart."

A flash of rage shone in the murderer's eyes, and he was gnashing his teeth, but M. Mechinet's broad shoulders and iron grip extinguished in him every desire for resistance.

I found in a drawer of the bureau all the articles my companion had mentioned. And twenty minutes later, Victor, "duly packed in," as the expression goes, in a cab, between M. Mechinet and myself, was driving toward Police Headquarters.

"What," I said to myself, astonished by the simplicity of the thing, "that is all there is to the arrest of a murderer; of a man destined for the scaffold!"

Later I had occasion to learn at my expense which of criminals is the most terrible.

This one, as soon as he found himself in the police cell, seeing that he was lost, gave up and told us all the details of his crime.

He knew for a long time, he said, the old man Pigoreau, and was known by him. His object in killing him was principally to cause the punishment of the crime to fall on Monistrol. That is why he dressed himself up like Monistrol and had Pluton follow him. The old man once murdered, he had had the terrible courage to dip in the blood a finger of the body, to trace these five letters, MONIS, which almost caused an innocent man to be lost.

"And that had been so nicely arranged," he said to us with cynic bragging. "If I had succeeded, I would have killed two birds with the same stone. I would have been rid of my friend Monistrol, whom I hate and of whom I am jealous, and I would have enriched the woman I love."

It was, in fact, simple and terrible.

"Unfortunately, my boy," M. Mechinet objected, "you lost your head at the last moment. Well, one is never perfect. It was the left hand of the body which you dipped in the blood."

With a jump, Victor stood up.

"What!" he exclaimed, "is that what betrayed me?"

"Exactly."

With a gesture of a misunderstood genius, the wretch raised his arm toward heaven.

"That is for being an artist," he exclaimed.

And looking us over with an air of pity, he added:

"Old man Pigoreau was left-handed!"

Thus it was due to a mistake made in the investigation that the culprit was discovered so promptly.

The day following Monistrol was released.

And when the investigating judge reproached him for his untrue confession, which had exposed the courts to a terrible error, he could not obtain any other answer than:

"I love my wife, and wanted to sacrifice myself for her. I thought she was guilty."

Was she guilty? I would have taken an oath on it. She was arrested, but was acquitted by the same judgment which sentenced Victor to forced labor for life.

M. and Mme. Monistrol to-day keep an ill-reputed wine-shop on the Vincennes Road. Their uncle's inheritance has long ago disappeared; they live in terrible misery.

THE END

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